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Author's Note

[image]

04:21 PST, 23.12.19

There is no 'Allegiances' page like in the canon books, so you are not missing that.

This story had already been written and mostly edited offline to ensure that it could never be too far delayed, cancelled, or have its plot distorted. The story has been spellchecked to the best of my abilities, but it is inevitable that errors will make it through. Please report any seen.

Most importantly enjoy the story.

- Tyta

Prologue

The light of the sun kept things warm enough, defused by the gray slab of clouds that spanned the sky. But with each step taken, she trembled. The wind bit at her clawless paws, the snow creeping its way into every crevasse of the fat scars that remained. Her long, gray fur was dotted with snow, as was the mud-brown medicine vest strapped to her back. The bags that floated on each side swayed as the cat slowly padded through the thick. Her ears twitched. She darted behind a pile of red stone and flattened them. Her body shuffled itself downward until the bags were touching the ground. The whistle turned into a scream that boomed above her. She creaked her head up in time to glimpse the shadow streak across the sky. The subtle turn it was making did not complete before it was out of sight. As the whistling quieted, she stood herself up and continued forward. Carefully shaking to not let the bags shift too much, she brushed the snow away from the bald spots near her belly. Her destination was in sight.

She cleared her throat. "They aren't supposed to fly that low."

There were no monsters on the thunderpath, just a thin veil of snow. Not a twoleg in sight. She did not bother looking both ways when she crossed, but she did glance up every few heartbeats. Even if they were just silhouettes, she knew they were there. They were screeching loud enough for the rats to be out of sight. On the other side lay a statue tall enough to block the view of the twolegplace behind her. Its stone was unusually shaped compared to the form of those who created it. But she was not looking directly at it. Instead, she was focused on a small part of the base. She walked around until she saw it. The mark of the *achse* twolegs. The 'X' had a small line coming from its ends, facing right for all four. She swiveled her head backwards; the same mark adorned each side of her vest's bags. Nodding, she sat at eye level of the mark.

"It's hard to find this symbol sometimes." She cleared her throat again. "The *achse* twolegs are gone, and the ones who replaced them

really hate it. This *berlin* defiantly isn't the same one Panzer described."

She rested her paw on the symbol as the sky-monsters were doubling back. Ears flattened and chest in the snow, she waited for them to scream by and out of sight. She left herself partially buried for a bit longer, listening for their distance. She gagged, putting her chest into it. Coughing up a bit of bile, she cleared her throat again.

"Don't worry, Littlestar. I'm much healthier than I look or sound. Just extra brought into the den to groom last night. They got me thinking about LeafClan, and the state we left *hamburg* in. We have received no word from them besides what Flyfoot told us – hard to believe she's one of my friends now. Even if she doesn't act like it..."

She took a deep breath and ran her tail across the back of her neck; three rigid dents stood out, no fur.

"Yeah, I still think about that." She whispered, glancing about. "On the bright side, the twolegs must've rebuilt it by now. How magnificent it must look. The field you were buried in is probably been turned back into grassland or something, much better than that wasteland we... wait. I was saying something about LeafClan."

Her tail wiggled in front of her face.

"Right!" she shouted, covering her mouth and shutting her eyes. Clearing her throat again, she dropped her tail. "Sometimes I can forget my face fur is white. I was talking about disease. Last time I snuck out to talk to you, the blackcough was just a few cases. Now we have a few dozen cases. And more come in every single night. They're scared that the cat in our backlands has given it to them. Some prophet incarnate, they call her. I don't know. StoneClan was never a real clan. Never followed a warrior code and never followed ancestral pawsteps. Not like the ones here. *Nothing* like the ones here... um..."

She moved herself away from the symbol, never letting her tail away from the statue's base. The sky-monster was slower this time. She closed her eyes and rolled her ears upward. She took in the whistle it made underneath the screeches and booms tearing

through the sky. A few deep breaths calmed her down when it started fading to the wind.

"Um... speaking of real clans, they're in real trouble. Both of them." She glanced around again, taking cautious steps forward. "These clans never got along. The fact that Heavyclaw leaving just a day earlier meant he ended up in a different clan. Didn't face all the problems along the way, either – not that it was your fault! I don't blame you for that. It was hard to leave you there and harder to watch you die, but I would've never forgiven myself if I just left you alone. Neither would the others. I don't know much about the ones on Heavyclaw's side. Whose still alive, who isn't. UnderClan is very secretive. And if they are alive, they're probably hidden away underground like the rest of their senior members. It's been so long since I've seen Blueclaw or Burn or any of them. I pray I get to see them in my lifetime. That they're still alive. And that this war between us and them just ends... yeah. I can say that. I don't care how long or what they're fighting for. I just want to see my friends..."

Her ears swiveled back up. She shook the snow off her and cleared her throat again.

"I get distracted easily. Especially after the Axin Mess – I never told you that, did I?" The she-cat's tail rolled at the tip. "They call it the Axin Mess. Can you believe it? It's supposed to be *Achse* Tragedy. But they can't say *achse* properly. Can't blame them; not every clan had a Panzer. But it makes it seem like it was your fault. That uniting the three *hamburg* groups against LeafClan was their demise. Makes me a bit irritated. I don't like being irritated or mad. I'm fine being happy, sad... melancholy. Something in between, I don't know. Panzer didn't teach me everything."

She cleared her throat, padding back towards the 'X' mark.

"Blackcough is running through the camp, everyone is superstitious of a prophet kit, we're locked in war, and there's no twolegs to force it off with their own problems." She reached the mark, resting her forehead against it. "Sometimes I just wish there was nothing. That we never found this clan, that the snake-monster never had a path here. No war, no bridge, no separation, just us. Time to just be with

each other before we all go to StarClan. Time I never got with you."

Her face curled up, eyes tightly shut. Her breath in was broken, but she held it. Ears swiveled up, then down. She exhaled.

"And somewhere without these sky-monsters those... hornet-brained twolegs! Darting about at random times..."

Another deep breath calmed her. Her face let itself relax, and she kept her forehead on the mark and opened her eyes. Her tail found itself on the back of her neck again, running over the three bald dents.

"It doesn't always heal right... but things can change. We have your kin to look forward to... Christa's kin, of course, but she has your defect. I don't know what good a scentless medicine cat will do in all this, but she's off at her ceremony right now with Flyfoot. With StarClan still not speaking to us, I don't know how it will go. Our seniors don't care. They just need another healer. She is to take on traditional ancestor naming, so she should be Blackleaf when I see her again. Despite her... growing pains, I'm still proud of her. She would've made a fine addition to StoneClan."

Her ears darted up; the wind was giving way to more distant screeching. She shook her fur one last time before backing away from the statue.

"I can only stand so much of this while outside. As usual, thanks for keeping Wolfgang, Flyfoot, and Christa around with me. Hope Karl is spreading the word of the *Achse* Tragedy wherever he is. Keep an eye on Whitestar, Flaum, and Shortfang until my time comes to see them. And I know she can be mean, but try to keep Panzer company. She'd really appreciate it."

I - 'The False Shadow'

The two crowds took turns jeering at each other. The yelling of dozens overpowered the creaking of the superstructure in the wind. The whistles against the soaring crossbeams, and the nips of cold that came with it, were ignored. They were packed cheek to cheek, an invisible barrier of their own making running between. Swiping and occasional clawing crossed it, prompting the other side to do the same. Cats from each side had crouched on the flat railings, far from the conflict. They twitched, daring the others to pounce. The groups were pushed closer by the insults of the other. Two were further out than the rest, one from each side.

"Let him have it, comrade!" one of them shouted.

"Imagine your jaws around her neck. Tasting Shadow blood for the first time!" the other side said.

"Do not let that pathetic excuse for a tom strike first. Remind them why they hide away underground."

"Your promotion starts with you dragging her to our side." A one of them shoved the tom just a pawstep away from the opposing she-cat. "Let us *all* have a bit of her before throwing her into the river."

"If your warriors wasted less time coming up with insults, they might actually win fights!"

"Yeah don't be intimidated, comrade. I see his legs shaking!"

"That's *enough*. We're leaving." The shout was barely audible above all else. The group on the she-cat's side was hollering and stamping their paws. A tabby she-cat on the other side pushed her way through the group and tapped the shaking tom on the shoulder. His legs tensed up a bit before he tilted his head back just a little, eyes still firmly locked on the opponent before him.

"Well look who it is." The she-cat's side made way for a tom, his tan

fur puffing to the gusts of wind. "Windstripe's come to break up the fight this time."

"Because your warriors keep breaking the treaty," Windstripe said, pushing herself in front of the shaking tom. "Giving yourself any excuse to show off that disgusting tail of yours."

The tom lowered his long tail, split at the end in two directions, one just a flap of hairy skin and the other a thinner than usual tip. "Who called you off this time? Blueclaw?"

"Who cares. Your gutless warriors are the ones who instigated it."

"Gutless? Yours are making jokes about taking turns mating with an apprentice."

"Apprentices who grow up to become the cruel warriors on your side hurl those same threats at ours. So maybe she deserves it. Just like your littermate if she were here."

The tom hissed, as did the rest of his comrades. "I'd have trouble mating, too, if my face looked like yours. It's starting to mess with you now."

Windstripe growled. "These scars were earned, unlike that flappy nub of yours. What has the name 'Leaftail' ever evoked?"

"The memories of the nineteen you've lost against my patrols!"

The she-cat swiped at Leaftail. He barely dodged and reared up to grapple her.

"When I said enough, I meant *enough*!"

A shrill voice interrupted the pair, nowhere near either of the groups. Leaftail dropped in front of Windstripe as she backed away from his side, the tom scrambling behind her.

The she-cat puffed her gray fur one more time. "This bridge is no place for that she-kit you call an apprentice. Code or not, we *will* kill her."

Leaftail could hardly hear the voice above the breeze. Windstripe and her group quickly padded away from the border. He took a deep breath while his comrades hollered at them. The apprentice she-cat was looking at him. He waved his tail in a circle above him; the warriors gathered a tail-length apart from each other and looked around. The cats on Windstripe's side had dispersed, a few sitting at both sides of the bridge. His group calmed, and the sound of the wind and the creaking bridge returned.

He faced his comrades. "Alright, get back to your original patrols—"

The warriors around him quickly dispersed, all but a couple and the apprentice. His tail dropped and he took another deep breath. On the far side of the bridge approached two cats. The one in the lead dwarfed the one behind her twofold. Her shaggy fur was tossed around in the breeze, nearly blocking the view of the second. Their white coats kept them from being spotted until they were in earshot. Amidst the larger one's fur, pink eyes looked straight through the tan warrior.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Leaftail said. Only the warriors bowed.

"Had hunch you messing around with pretty she-cat on other side again," the large cat said.

"It *never* happens like that," he growled. "We hate each other."

"No growling at senior members, Leaftail. Least those warriors know who in charge here. Now what happen?"

He sighed. "They pushed one of their toms right to the border. So, we responded with our own challenger... I would've never let the others fight. It would've just been me and Windstripe—"

"Finally going at it after all that teasing." The small one's shrill voice grabbed the warriors' attention. "Never could keep yourself under control when you're around her."

"Stop it, both of you," Leaftail said. "I hate that she-cat and everything she stands for. Don't twist it into something it's not. And

I'm telling the truth. I would've never let anyone else start fighting. It was either me and Windstripe, or those two apprentices."

"We're in a truce. *No one* should be fighting right now."

"She was making fun of you at one point. She threatened forced mating on you and the apprentice—"

"I don't care if she threatens to mate with me herself. Orders say no fighting."

The apprentice's face curled; the warriors clenched their muzzles holding back purrs.

"I hear that, you two," Leaftail growled. "Blackleaf, that's disgusting. You could've said literally anything else."

"You're supposed to be the tough one here." Blackleaf puffed out her chest fluff. "You know, if I bare my fangs just right, the pink in my eyes looks orange. Pair it with my leafbare fur and I look like a more intimidating warrior than you."

The warriors loosed their purrs.

"Don't you two have patrol routes?" Leaftail said.

"Our orders were to guard you," one of them responded.

The tom shook his head and motioned his tail forward. The other three cats flanked his sides, but Blackleaf stuck her long tail in the apprentice's path.

"How old are you?" she asked. The large cat next to her tuned back into the conversation.

"Old enough to patrol—"

"I asked you a question, kit," Blackleaf hissed.

Her tail curled around her legs. She looked away. "I just turned four moons."

"Stars above, Leaftail, we bring kits to patrol the bridge now? They're supposed to be in the backlands. Near the rogue nests at best."

"Since we're in a truce, I figured it was the best way to introduce her to UnderClan's patrol routes and tactics. She'll be here someday and it's up to us to make sure she's prepared."

"We pressure kits into fighting older toms?"

"She's *your* size. And she's more than capable of handling herself in a fight."

"I told him I wanted to go," the apprentice mewed. "I-I wanted to earn my place among the clan's warriors."

"You still have a loose scruff. The Clan of False Shadows does not send *kits* to the frontline."

The apprentice's tail curled between her legs. "Leaftail's a senior warrior, and he's so young. I wanted to prove to my comrades that I could be—"

"Oh shut up. The only thing you have to prove is that you can survive a leafbare. Now come on. You're going back to camp. Straight to the medicine den."

"I gave her permission to be out here," Leaftail said. "At least let me keep her at the edge of the bridge. Teach her about all the ways to navigate it."

"No," Blackleaf growled. "That head of yours is about as useful as she would've been in a fight. Fleetheart would kill you if she knew you were taking a kit to the border."

"No she wouldn't," he grumbled. "Sorry. Doesn't matter when she was promoted. Medicine cat supersedes warriors. For what it's worth, I thought you were great today standing up to that tom."

"R-Really?" she said, her tail arcing upward.

"Yeah. You had his legs shaking and everything. And he was easily

twice your age."

Blackleaf looped her tail around the apprentice's neck and pulled. "Don't encourage her. This is for your own safety, kit."

The apprentice glanced back to Leaftail and purred. Blackleaf pulled once more to get her to start moving. She shook her head at her littermate and motioned the kit to walk ahead of them. She paused for a while, letting the kit get out of earshot before following herself.

She glanced back. "One more thing, you three. If they say they want me again, you tell them they know where to find me."

The other warriors meowed in agreement. Leaftail flicked his tail and motioned them to follow. The kit was a tree-length ahead of them. Blackleaf padded to catch up to her larger companion, who left her behind. She looked at the border one more time. A thin line of cats staring each other down, now a couple tree-lengths apart. Dozens at the sides, some standing on the raised ledges that blocked twolegs from falling off. A few of them glanced at her when she walked by, giving blank stares. She only glanced at them. As she got closer to the opening, the bridge creaked less. The brown supports gradually sloped downward and into the snow. It was the only part where the two sets of silverpath glistened through. She glanced up and shook her fur; the large she-cat was motioning her, tail jutting about.

"I have no idea what it means when you motion like that," Blackleaf said.

"Only have half tail," the she-cat said. "Deal with it."

"You have several bald patches. Don't you ever get cold?"

"No."

"There's snow all over you. You know it's snowing, right?"

"Wildcats never get cold."

The two kept walking for a while. Both glanced at the small twoleg

shed on their left, several cats walking about. A couple of them bowed when they spotted the pair.

"Why you ask if cold?" Flyfoot said.

"I... thought you might be cold."

"Did look cold during ceremony?"

Blackleaf growled. "What, I can't ask a simple question now? Not allowed to care? I was concerned you were cold, that's all. You've been out in the snow all day."

"And I say wildcats not get cold. There answer."

"You seemed cold during the ceremony. I was trying to meditate and you kept making heavy breaths."

Flyfoot glared at the younger cat. "You never hear cat sneeze before?"

"Not like that."

"It wildcat sneeze—"

"Don't give me that horse-dirt. Your sneezing was breaking my concentration. Took me forever to fall asleep."

"You *fall asleep* during ceremony?"

"Only for a little bit," Blackleaf glanced at the apprentice walking far ahead of them. "I was actually dreaming about—"

"Shut it!" Flyfoot growled. "Not supposed to hear what you see."

"But I'm pretty sure you were—"

"Not a word, little one."

The young cat's tail flicked. "You can't call me that anymore. I'm *your* rank now."

Flyfoot growled. "You will be 'little one' until day you die."

"Okay, what. What did I do this time?" Blackleaf hissed. "Every time you do this, it's because you're mad at me for something. What did I do this time?"

"Not mad, just surprise in bad way," Flyfoot said. "Leaftail stand guard at bridge all day and first thing you do as medicine cat is insult him, yell him. Disappointing to see after all you learn to not treat every cat with respect."

"Don't even start on respect," Blackleaf growled. "You've never shown me a shred of respect my whole life. I wear my marks proud, and I love my littermate. But he's stubborn and makes stupid decisions. Someone has to point it out."

Flyfoot went back to watching the apprentice. "Maybe see from his view. Medicine cat supposed to do that. Apprentice want to learn. He teach apprentice. You really think he let her fight that older tom?"

"Yes, I think he would."

"He not. He fight Windstripe, no one else. All you need tell him was fighting lessens chances of seeing captured clanmates. Remind him why truce. Not have to yell at him."

"Look at her," Blackleaf said. "She's young enough for you to pick her up by her scruff. The fact that hers is still loose should be enough for you, right?"

Flyfoot kept her eyes on the apprentice. She was walking along the exposed parts of the silverpath, pretending to have to balance herself. She did not miss a step. The wildcat nodded.

"Leaftail right. She your size. Maybe I pick you up by scruff and prove to her she can fight."

"Her breed is just big. She's still a kit."

"In my old clan, we learn to fight like warriors at two moons. We not able to because of size, dexterity. But we fight better than most when we finally old enough to be warriors. Wonder why you see no wildcat clans near others?"

"So much for treat every cat with respect," Blackleaf mumbled.

"What you say?" Fyfoot growled. "Not quite hear."

"I said you're showing little respect to that kit right now. She isn't old enough to fight, or know what could happen to her at the border. And Leaftail just encourages her and you support it."

"I not support that action. I see from his point of view. Something medicine cat supposed to do. I respect Leaftail for what he try to do. Part of respect is show trust. But you... you just to break up fight at bridge? You do extra. You tease mating jokes. You tease Leaftail. You break apprentice's mood. And you backtalk me. To me, you always be 'little one'. Now walk back in peace. You about to make me yell, then have to explain to kit why we yelling when she hears."

The younger cat growled, but held her words. She could see the scowl Flyfoot was trying to wipe from her eyes. Blackleaf faced hers forward, also watching the apprentice effortlessly keep herself balanced amidst the thicker snow by standing on the silverpath. She had not missed a step. She glanced back; they were far from the bridge, barely able to make out its form amidst the snowfall. The twoleg nests far to her left and right became clearer. Then she returned to the apprentice. She was clawing herself out of a deep pocket of snow, barely managing to pull herself out. The young cat nodded and held her tail high.

Chapter 2

She ruffled her pelt once she walked through the thick draperies of fake-fur that blocked the entrance. The sun was shining only through the large hole at the top, a massive pile of debris and stone directly under it. The walls were a bit damp, lines of moisture running down their smooth facades. She made her way down the short ramp and into the greater part of the den, dropping the rat she was carrying at the base.

"Fresh kill's here," she said.

"Not too loud," a she-cat said. "Some of the ones in the back are really tired."

"Wondering when you show up." The wildcat had the she-cat apprentice pinned under her front paw, struggling in vain to escape. "I ask you bring food. You bring one little rat."

"Hey, you didn't ask me to bring enough for the whole den."

"If you really thinking about clanmates, you do anyway."

"Comrades, Flyfoot. Comrades."

"What the difference?"

The she-cat stamped her paw down. "Both of you, please. I really don't want to hear this right now. And come on, Blackleaf. You were *just* promoted."

"Den massive, Fleetheart," Flyfoot said. "They not hear us in back."

"A pile of debris isn't a good sound barrier," Blackleaf said.

A cat walked over and snatched the mouse from its place. Only a few eyes glanced at the young medicine cat as she walked over to the others. She carefully stepped over the twoleg vials, some open. The aroma of lavender drifted around her, slowly fading the damp

smell as it expanded into the den.

"Why is that apprentice pinned under you?" Blackleaf said.

"We're trying something new for the blackcough." Fleetheart puffed out her black and white fur when she darted near the open vial. "That kit got a scratch on her way back here, so I decided to put some of the burning medicine water on it to keep it from getting infected. Maybe keeping small cuts extra clean will make her less likely to get blackcough. Panzer taught me that. I really don't like the smell of it, so I opened the lavender vial to clear the air."

"Little apprentice keep squirming. She know what burning medicine water feel like. So I pin her. Now we all done. Get out." She pushed the kit towards Blackleaf.

"I told you I was fine," the apprentice mewed. "One small cut never killed a cat."

"Not yet, at least," Fleetheart said. "I think the blackcough is spreading through blood. Not good for the amount of grooming and fighting this clan does."

"And I don't care what Leaftail says. If I catch you within a tree-length of an UnderClan border again, I'll beat you before *they* get a chance to."

The apprentice shot a glare at Blackleaf. She hissed back, making the kit jump and dart up the ramp and out of the den. The young medicine cat stretched her legs, bending her tail several different ways before finally taking a seat near the lavender vial.

"This scent always makes me queasy," Blackleaf said.

"Then not sit next to it," Flyfoot growled.

"It'll be everywhere soon. Might as well get it out of the way."

She shook, flinging water droplets about.

"Mouse-brain, snow melt in here. Do that outside." Flyfoot flicked her paw, getting a few drops on Blackleaf's face.

"It's just a bit. Keep your cool."

Fleetheart passed between them before they could start hissing again. She jammed the wood topper into the opening and carefully picked it up, setting it in a dark brown vest. It had two bags on the side, one open and holding more clear-stone vials. It stretched open as she shuffled things around in one of them to make the vial fit. Occasionally when she moved, Blackleaf glanced at the 'X' marking on the side of it – one tip for each end of the shape, facing right. She stared at it for a while, while the older cat was pushing the vest closer to the others.

"Lavender getting you already?" Flyfoot said.

"Shut up. I was just looking at them," Blackleaf growled.

"Not tell me to shut up, little one."

Walking between them again, Fleetheart jammed the top on the lavender vial and set it aside. She returned to her vest and started messing with the other bag.

"How did the ceremony go?" she asked. "Did anything special happen on the way?"

The young cat shook her head. "We just walked there and I went through it. It doesn't feel like much has changed."

Fleetheart's ears dropped. "Well did you at least *hear* anything?"

"Not break warrior code, Fleetheart," Flyfoot said. "What happened, hers alone."

"Ancestor clans don't follow warrior codes. She asked, and I don't mind telling." Blackleaf noticed her claws coming out – she quickly retracted them before the others noticed. She glanced again at the medicine vest. Fleetheart had finished messing with the other bag, but her eyes kept drifting to the symbol on the sides. She saw the older cat's ears were still low. She sighed. "Actually, never mind."

"Oh..." Fleetheart looked away.

"I didn't hear anything from StarClan, if that's what you're wondering."

"Well... that just won't do." Blackleaf could not see what Fleetheart had set on top of her vest with her blocking it.

"Have *you* heard anything?" Blackleaf asked.

"I never get responses, but I speak to Littlestar whenever I get a free moment. I don't like being outside too long in leafbare. The sky-monsters are always out too much in leafbare... anyway, I want to give you a present."

The older cat's ears perked up again. She grabbed what was on top of her vest and tossed it in front of Blackleaf. She jumped back, but eventually her eyes rested on the deep green vest that lay in front of her, the hue deep in every fiber. She stood and sniffed at it. It barely had any aside from the natural odd smell the fake-fur gave off. Her claws scraped right off the sides when she rested her paw on them. There was one square bag on each side of the harness, just like Fleetheart's. But they were much smaller, as were the vests. The tops of them flipped over and were closed by a strap of fake-fur that ran down the center. Also unlike hers, the bottom was one solid piece as opposed to extra straps.

"Wow." Flyfoot pawed at it for a bit, ears perked up. "For pup, right?"

Fleetheart nodded. "Found it while I was out talking to Littlestar a few moons ago. The twoleg warriors were walking pups around in these things and one of them managed to slip it off. I took it before they noticed it was missing and washed the scent off it. It's yours, Blackleaf."

The young cat was still staring at them. "Really?"

"Really. I wanted to give them to you right when I found them. To motivate you to, you know... feel good about being a medicine cat. But Solestar ordered your training complete sooner, so I just saved them until then. You know twoleg and herbal medicine, and wolf-speak. Figured you were only missing one thing to be a younger

version of Panzer."

Blackleaf kept rubbing her paw over the material. "What's it for? I mean, what do the twolegs use them for?"

"They train dogs with them." Fleetheart looked at her own vest. "They make them smaller depending on the breed of dog they give them to. Yours was for training pups. Mine was for small dogs. They can carry medicine and messages to their warriors through tight places and things like that. At least, that's what the last war dog I spoke to told me they were for."

She looked at one of the bags. There was a red cross in the center of it, standing out against the green. Blackleaf glanced at the side of Fleetheart's vest. She saw the deep stains running near the bottoms. They started dark close to the symbol and a bright brown tint the further down the stain went, until they were unmistakably red on the bottom of each bag.

"I cleaned them thoroughly in the river," Fleetheart continued. "The dog and smoke scents have been washed off, so they shouldn't mess with you being scentless."

"These are great," Blackleaf mewed. "Maybe I can return the favor and wash yours off just as well. You seem busy here, and they look like there are a lot of blood stains—"

"Yes, they certainly could..." Fleetheart's ears and tail fell. "They could... well, I really don't want to mess with the memories." She cleared her throat. "Clan relics like this need to be kept in-tact. And... I think I hear one of our clanmates waking up. I'll make sure the water is still flowing back there."

She scrambled to her paws, tossing a few more vials that were next to the others in the open bag and walked away. Blackleaf put and ear to the den; she could hear nothing.

Flyfoot sighed. "Why you have to say that?"

"Say what?"

"You always forget Axin Mess. Fleetheart sensitive. She been

through lots, so not supposed to bring up when can be helped. You mess with her."

"Well how was I supposed to know that?" Blackleaf said, her tail flat.

"You listen, that how. Not something just bring up whenever... Whatever. Axin Mess survivors lean on others. You not know what it like. Just forget for now."

"Okay, okay..." the young medicine cat kept looking at the symbol in the middle of her own. "I just wish Fleetheart would talk about it once in a while. All of my lessons about the Axin Mess came from you and Wolfgang. And neither of them knew as much about Littlestar as she did."

"Why interest in Littlestar sudden?" Flyfoot's tail flicked about.

"I know what you're going to say, but its related to the dream I've been having lately."

"Since it part of medicine cat ceremony, not want to hear about." Flyfoot faced away.

"But I've been having the dream before that, too. This is just the first time it involved—"

"You know what I about to growl." She leaned in, keeping her voice lower at the sound of scratching near the back. "Ask something else. Vest gift more than just looking like dead old kittypet."

Blackleaf dragged it closer to her. "Does this mean..."

"Yes, if it take mind off stupid dream." Flyfoot glanced back towards the rubble; more scratching from the other side. One of the warriors had moved to the wall, drinking the water from the channel that flowed against it. "This place no place for you. Blackcough spreading. Fleetheart already have it few times when she in *hamburg*. She immune. Wildcats naturally immune. Leaves just you. Last thing needed is drop dead medicine cat right when you become one. You go out, look for medicine. Harder to find without herbs to crutch on in leafbare. Sent to bridge to help once in while.

Whatever. Just not stay in camp most of day."

"No tricks?" Blackleaf asked. "No catch?"

"Of course first thing said when given what she wants is 'trick' instead of 'thank you'. No, little one. No trick. You wanting this for moons. No reason hold back from it now."

Blackleaf slid her paw towards Flyfoot's. "Thank you. I really mean that, too."

"Not thank me, mouse-brain. Thank Fleetheart. She do all this. While you at it, apologize too for bringing up Axin Mess reference."

"What?" Blackleaf's ears shot back. "Every time I apologize to her I get a 'oh it's okay, it's not your fault' with *no* explanation. *Every time*."

"This time you get gift out of it. You hardly respect Axin Mess as is... maybe you talk about self. Make her open up if it what you want. Let her talk other ears off for change."

The young cat returned her gaze to her new vest. Fleetheart's was still sitting nearby, the dirt and blood stains contrasting her own pristine ones. She glanced at the rubble tower, the shine of the water on the gray stone reflecting the dim sunlight. Snow had continued falling onto it from the ceiling hole above it, the patter being overpowered by the scratching of more claws out of view behind the pile. The breeze occasionally snapped at the white fake-fur covers, and she turned towards them.

"Where you going?" Flyfoot said.

"They're all going to be up soon," Blackleaf said. "We need more fresh-kill in here so the infected don't have to get it."

"Hey!"

Blackleaf froze at Flyfoot's bark. The wildcat glanced behind her to spot Fleetheart helping another up. She leaned close to the young cat's ear. "Not take this leave too seriously. You been obsess with StarClan since you kit, and you do stupid stuff for it. I not care what

Solestar say, or what your dream say. Your clanmates first. You are Black*leaf* now, not Blackpaw. You medicine cat. Never forget duty to help clanmates. Got it?"

"Alright, I got it. You don't have to sound so urgent... also, I do respect the Axin Mess. I'm just not afraid to talk about the faults, like with your old clan leader or Littlestar herself. You're right. I am a medicine apprentice no longer. And, because of that, I will succeed where Littlestar failed. After some sleep, I can finally get started on finding answers."

Blackleaf padded through the slot between the fake-furs and was out of sight.

"You got moss in ear or something? Hey! Blackleaf?" Flyfoot took a few steps up the ramp before the gap was closed. The wildcat shook her head. "It done, Fleetheart," she mumbled. "Here your arrogant, stubborn new medicine cat. Enjoy the dirt it spew from mouth."

Chapter 3

She kept running through the endless corridor of fractured twoleg nests and the stench of burning rubble. The heat of the flames ate at her white fur, tossing bits of it behind her to be incinerated in the wind. Her breaths were coarse and the torrent of air she was fighting blocked her hearing. Her eyes fanatically darted left to right to left again, only the fires to light the way on the thunderpath. The stones singed her paw pads, but she kept going. The path ahead was clear enough. Every few heartbeats she would look forward to leap over obstacles.

Her claws ceased her movement. They held on as tightly as they could to the stone. Her head swiveled up; the smoke had cleared and the moon was shining through. It was sucked to her left, the invisible force of the fire threatening to take her along with it. She put all her weight into her paws, driving herself as hard towards the ground as she could. But there was still scratching beneath her. Little by little, she would be consumed. Every kittenstep in one direction was closer to the inferno. She gazed at the white of its base, feeling her eyes strain to stay open amidst the heat of it. The red tips towered above even the twoleg nests. It ate at them from the inside out until only the outer walls were left to crumble and feed it more. From the corner of her eyes was something looking back at her. Inside the white, a pair of glowing green dots were staring back at her. The closer she got, the easier it was to see the white in them, and the black near their center. The eyes did not blink and never faded. Another kittenstep towards the flames revealed another set of eyes, this one blue. Just like the green, they just stared. She could no longer look away, ignoring the blinding of her own. More and more appeared from the inferno's center. Some of them were near the red tips. Most were at her level. They started to crowd and push against each other. Her own finally failed her; she saw nothing but a mess of whites and reds. But the torrent ceased. The wails cried out from the center. Each bit closer to the fire loosed more screams. The rubble around her was being tossed overhead and into the flames. Some of it struck the eyes and took

them away.

The last of her fur was torn away. The flames bit at her exposed flesh, quickly charring it. Her nose was flooded with the scent. She fought harder and harder. The inferno did not stop consuming and screaming. She folded her ears into her head and curled her tail. She braced her claws. The fire pulled her closer. She aimed her head high and yelled out herself. She did not stop wailing until the fire did.

What?

Her vision still failing, the blur of red and white had had enough. The torrent stopped. The smoke returned and flooded her nostrils. Her claws had whittled down to nubs but held her strong.

Don't...

The she-cat stood, feeling nothing from the blood stains from where her paws were dragged.

Don't go. Don't leave me here.

She reached her paw towards the fire and retracted it. The sting of the burns ran high up her leg, the paw itself split wide open. She moved it close to her, trying to lick it with her dry tongue. It only made the gap larger. She watched, drop by drop, as the blood mixed with the ashes her leg was reduced to. Her nose twitch, and her eyes returned to the flames.

I'm sorry...

She took a step forward, resting her split paw on the ground. The small sizzle was ignored; she took another step forward.

Let me come with you this time. Please!

Her teeth gritted against the pain as she bounded forward. She nearly tripped over the rubble she could no longer see, and jumped at any odd shadow. But the heat did not deter her. She felt it ingulf her until she stopped breathing. She leapt into the flames and slammed against a wall of red-stone. She could feel the crack run

through her skull and inside her head. Her body hit the ground, the fire immediately roasting it. Her throat had clogged with ash and would not let her scream. And her vision went pitch black.

No! I'm sorry!

"I'm sorry..."

The voice trailed off, almost lost in the gentle whistles of the breeze. She lifted her head and opened her eyes; the view of the bridge towering in the distance against the night sky eased her pounding heart. Her paw pads were cool under the gray-stone she rested on. The large rock next to her was covered in snow, still clamping down on the white fake-fur that blocked the entrance to the medicine den underneath. She sighed, retracting her claws and lifting her head. Looking down, she saw strands of long, white fur stirring. She snapped her tail and ran it across her back; fur still in place. She returned to the bridge.

Why does it just have to happen? She thought. *Why can't I get anything more from it... calm down, Blackleaf. It's just a stupid dream.*

Blackleaf stood and shook away the excess snow. She sat, movement catching her eye. Several of her comrades were leaving camp through the front. The wide gap amidst the shallow wall had flooded with several cats entering and exiting simultaneously.

Dumb superstitions like that are the reason I'm on my mission. They wouldn't need to count their patrols so carefully if they were praying. If they were putting their faith in StarClan.

Once they had gotten through the gate, they split off. Over a dozen started the taxing walk to the bridge, and the rest went the opposite direction. None of them would look at her as they passed by the far side of the medicine den. The cat far behind her was barely visible amidst the piles of snow atop the den, but it walked from its position and towards the group.

Even when there's no prisoners in there, they guard the exit like eagles. I think they secretly want UnderClan to use that tunnel into the medicine den. Give them a reason to justify their patrols.

The group heading to the bridge shuffled slowly through the deep snow. Her focus went to the ones who had entered camp. They quickly padded across the gaping expanse of the center, nothing but tall piles of snow to weave around. They went all the way to the base of a massive structure. There were holes dug into the snow where they collectively dropped an assortment of birds and rats. They kicked a bit of snow over them before walking towards a neighboring den in much better condition than the main one. The patrol's leader went into the main den, however, walking through the gaping holes in the wall rather than the usual front entrance the nests had. The rest of the nest was in no better shape. A warrior guarding the 'entrance' dipped his head and lead the way, both disappearing into the unlit structure. More began scurrying about the camp. Dozens emerged from the den next to the main one as the other members of the hunting patrol returned. They each ran in different directions, a few towards the medicine den. One looked up at her. Blackleaf scowled in vain, as he simply waved back and entered the den below her. Her eyes trailed off him and towards one of the stone walls that bordered the camp. Walking towards the main nest with a mouse was the she-cat apprentice. Her brown fur had been freshly groomed, and she was surrounded by kits. She could see the group bouncing behind her through the thin snow, drawing attention from some of the older cats.

Blackleaf tossed the snow about with her tail. *She wants to be a warrior so bad. A senior warrior... look how those kits follow her around. Like she's turned this into some kind of game. Must get it from the other warriors. Every time I talk to them it's always jokes and random stories. They'll do anything to take their minds off the fighting. Then, when they finally get a break, they're more active than ever. Extra patrols in the far borders. Taking kits to the bridge. Extra backland patrols. Bunch of bloodthirsty hawks without anything to pray to. I swear they believe that Rye cat is an incarnate more than they believe in StarClan themselves. They know this prisoner exchange can't end well. They aren't even acting like it will succeed. Neither side is. Only one of those warriors who doesn't seem obsessed with the war is Wolfgang. Wonder if he's down there...*

She looked over the area, eventually resting her eyes on a large tom. His gray tabby coat was still in the breeze, too thick to be

tossed about. When the orange in his eyes grazed her perch, she looked away until she was certain they were elsewhere. She watched the tom walk all the way from the fresh-kill pile to the camp entrance, the other warriors keeping their distance.

If I wasn't on vigil, I might've joined him. Now that Flyfoot and Fleetheart can't stick me on day callings, I'll shift my schedule to be active at night. He's the only one of the survivors I can ever get to talk about the Axin Mess. I wish I had more time with him... despite what the others say, he's always sure of himself. Even when he's alone. Which is all the time.

With the older tom out of sight, she fixed herself on the main den again. The worn red-stone was visible amidst the twoleg lights fastened in front of both the main nest and the one next to it. Most of the spots where clear-stone should have been was black instead, the material long gone. Massive water stains ran down the side where the lights where shining, even managing to overpower the moonlight. The debris that the holes in the walls would have created were piled around the den in key locations, blocking the smallest ground level holes. The red roof was an easy marker that her eyes glanced at each time she looked at the structure. The apprentice she-cat walked out of the front, the kits still trailing her. They were trying to mimic her walk; tail straight, ears up and swiveling about, and neck stretched out.

Idiot. Bring your neck in and move your head around. You can't just listen for threats. I was in warrior training for two moons and even I know that. What was Leaftail thinking... what is this whole clan thinking?

Blackleaf watched her comrades scurry below, dozens leaving and coming into camp. She took a deep breath and laid down again.

If any of them bothered to speak to me, I might know. I think that apprentice was one of the cats in the fire... if you're testing me, StarClan, I don't have the patience. Your words speak louder than your actions at this point. We just need a sign. And there's no way it's that stupid dream.

She closed her eyes, relaxing her ears into her head and curling her tail.

I have to make absolute certain that the dream isn't an omen. No one will know until I am certain. I already told myself I was going to find answers my way. The others have too many biases. Their minds are warped by the Axin Mess. Maybe real communication from the Stars will put them at ease. All of them. Especially her.

Her ears twitched while she worked to retract her claws.

The rubble around it was normal. But the scent the fire gives off... it burns my nose like it's real, but I swear it smells like lavender.

Chapter 4

The patter of the water droplets falling below echoed throughout the den. Morning light barely touching them, the small icicles were slowly wasting away. The young cat's fur shot up when a drop landed on her back. The sudden cold of the gray-stone beneath her paws startled her further. A small hole was her only way in. The guard constantly glanced at her, but never followed. Wind gusts made the den creek, the whistles audible all throughout the nest. To her right were stairs that ran up the side of the wall, the wood panels along them long rotted away and exposing their gray-stone foundation. She began her ascent.

"I won't be long," she said.

The guard stared.

The height between each step was as tall as she was, forcing her to leap her way up. She took a moment to breathe when she finally got to the top, staring at the faded colors of the images that adorned the wall. Their wood frames seemed immune to the wind and water that seemed to always run through the den. The balcony railing had decayed, exposing her to the beams of light that shined through the small holes in the wall. The second floor was almost silent, save for a bit of scratching at the opposite end of the balcony.

"Solestar?" she said. "Are you busy?"

"Blackleaf, is that you?" a deep voice responded. "I need to discuss something with you."

She made her way across the balcony, forward being the only unblocked path, the other entrances buried by the partly collapsed ceiling. The morning light shined into the only in-tact den. It illuminated most of the brightly colored flakes of stone beneath her. The fake-fur and wood were gone there, too, leaving a thin slab of stone with splintered fragments pushed to the right against the wall. The wood cover on the entrance to the den was still there, along

with the walls. It was partly open. Blackleaf peaked inside, spotting her leader's bobbed tail.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Of course, yes."

She slipped through the entrance and closed it behind her. The scent of char hit her along with the warmth of the smooth wood beneath her paws. Images of foreign scenes covered the walls, none of them dull like the ones outside the den. She made her way to the table in the middle, about half the height of a twoleg. She jumped atop it and looked out the layer of clear-stone that still covered the square holes in the wall. Despite the dust, she could see most of camp along with the bridge in the distance. Solestar was looking at it.

"Have the others come to see you yet?" Blackleaf said. "Did they tell you what they intend to do?"

"Yes," she responded. "First, tell me about your night's vigil. Were you alone the whole time?"

"Maybe we should discuss—"

"The other two probably said you're not supposed to tell anyone. But they're from silverpelt clans. You know you can tell me anything. Your promotion doesn't change that."

The older cat shook some of the dust from her fur. The brown and orange spots revealed the small matts that the white parts hid. Solestar's dark green eyes turned their attention to Blackleaf, who sat next to her.

"My vigil was fine."

"Just fine?" Solestar whisked her cropped tail against Blackleaf. "I know you can do better than that."

She glared at her leader.

Solestar twitched her whiskers. "That look may scare off a smitten

tom, but it won't work on me. Tell me what's on your mind?"

Blackleaf cleared her throat. "I'll just say it. I think the best use of my time is to learn why StarClan has abandoned us. Now that I have Flyfoot and Fleetheart's blessing to step away from the medicine den, I think I should—"

"And you believe this is the best use of your time?" Solestar began rubbing her paw. "Maybe it's dangerous for you to be around our sick comrades too long. But can I let you run around avoiding *all* of your duties?"

"Hey, StarClan is just as much a medicine cat's responsibility as healing the injured," Blackleaf snapped.

Solestar shook her head. "Really? Because this is the first I'm hearing such an ambitious dream. Most of our comrades don't know you for this, that's for sure."

"What?" Blackleaf's tail fur began to spike. "It's not just a dream. It's part of my job as a medicine cat and a member of this clan."

"Let's see what else has been part of your job. Numerous complaints from kits that you play too rough. Most of the warriors you interact with don't like your attitude. Even before you were their apprentice, Fleetheart and Flyfoot have been concerned with the way you treat our comrades. You have more toms on you in one season than most she-cats get during their whole life, and you've rejected them all. Violently. A simple 'no' would do. I haven't done anything about it now, but—"

"I'm here asking as a medicine cat!" Blackleaf hissed. "Not some little kit."

Solestar turned towards one of the images on the wall. It detailed an old twoleg holding a cat while standing near a busy thunderpath. Blackleaf continued to stare out the clear-stone.

"Why do you feel that this is more important than your comrades?" she asked.

The medicine cat grit her teeth. "I *don't*. By doing this, I'm *helping*

them. Our religion is almost forgotten. And it's because they lack answers. Our clan history has nothing to do with StarClan. Shouldn't that concern us?"

The older cat glanced back. "Should it? There might be a plague within our borders. A Star Covenant branch is nipping at our tails, their odd-eyed so-called Incarnate freaking out our warriors. A dog pack is trivial distance from us, just waiting to ruin everything. *And* were at war. The others may have given you permission to stay away from the den, but I think the best use of your time is to help gather supplies and heal away from camp."

"StarClan's neglect is just as serious. They went silent during the Great Sky War, and clans were acting desperate just to survive that chaos. Even this one. That can't be a coincidence. Clan cats have clearly done something to anger them, and we shouldn't make things worse and wave it off as a minor inconvenience."

Solestar shook her head. "When I was a kit, our clan had no medicine cat. No one to commune with the Stars. Times were terrible. Surviving on the heels of their war was always about catching traitors and enemies quick, so they wouldn't get us all killed. We managed."

Blackleaf stood, facing her leader's back. "You just managed, though. You survived through a tough situation. But what about the rest? StarClan gives everyone guidance. Prophecies, omens, wisdom, they keep clans balanced and level-headed. The Great Sky War may just be stories to me, but not to you. You lived through it. Half our clan is old enough to have lived through it. And especially to the Axin Mess survivors from *hamburg*, StarClan certainly isn't just a story. It was the core element of the whole incident."

Blackleaf waited for Solestar to speak. She remained silent, moving closer to an image hanging at the back of the den.

"I've heard our comrades speak of the Stars," she continued. "They do not tell it like any other story. To some, they are protectors of clan life. Others see them as prophets. But no one has completely forgotten their name... yet. If StarClan won't tell us why they have abandoned us, we have to find answers for ourselves. That's what

Littlestar did, and that's what I want to do."

Solestar let out a deep breath, whisking her tail back and forth. "Do you know what this image depicts?"

Blackleaf sat next to her leader. "It's Panzer and her owner, from when she was a kittypet and lived briefly in this twolegplace. But before it was destroyed and rebuilt."

Solestar nodded. "Panzer was perhaps one of the smartest cats to ever live. She was one of the few throughout the history of clans to experiment with twoleg healing methods and medicine. Even in her old age, she was one of Fleetheart's closest friends."

"I know," Blackleaf said. "What does that have to do with what I'm asking?"

"Everything, Blackleaf," she growled. "Her name will be remembered for an uncountable number of generations for doing so much good. Think about how many cats out there know twoleg medicine because of where she went when she was a kittypet. Or how many more could have, if she didn't die by Littlestar's ambitions. Littlestar will also be remembered for generations, but in infamy. She led to the destruction of *three* clans, scattering the survivors and leaving them with mental scars that may never go away. All for the sake of finding StarClan."

Blackleaf looked Solestar in the eye. "I have better odds than she did. The Great Sky War is long over. There are no burning nests or sky-monster raids, no heat or smoke in the middle of greenleaf to drive me to insanity... you know, just the idea that I can't groom myself has never mattered. I can't cool myself with my defect, yet I am perfectly fine. Littlestar succumbed to it. I can't. Not in the middle of leafbare. She and all her mistakes are in the past. I know them. I won't—"

She paused when she saw the claws of her leader digging into the wood. Her tail curled to hide her own doing the same.

Blackleaf sighed. "I know what you're going to say."

"No, you don't." Solestar took a deep breath and faced the young cat. "I have to assume you're ready to do whatever it is you're so compelled to do. I did rush your promotion, after all. It's just hard to trust you to avoid every single mistake, like I failed to do... but in the end, that was my decision to make. I have had faith in you since you were a kit. I never once let you assume you were less than great. It's time for me to back those words up with actions."

Blackleaf pressed her head against the older cat's chest. "Thank you. I swear you won't be disappointed."

"You were always destined to do something incredible. To make the Clan of False Shadows proud." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "You're a grown she-cat now, capable of greater things than any of us. Soon enough, you'll make me proud. You will make *them all* proud."

The two cats were silent in each other's presence. The dusty scents of the den seemed to fade away in a few wisps of wind that made their way through the cracks. The morning light had finally come in full, glistening off the snow outside and into the den. Nearby crows made their presence known, and they both looked at the clear-stone. Two patrols were heading towards camp.

Solestar pulled away, her ears folding back as she kept herself from looking any further at Blackleaf. "Y-You have answered me truthfully, and that's all I can ask for. But, since you're to be kept away from long stays in the medicine den, I have something you can manage. It involves negotiations. And it comes at more of Flyfoot's request than mine."

"Oh..." Blackleaf leaned a bit towards her leader before snapping herself to straight posture. "I mean what, um, did she ask me to do regarding the truce?"

"She is sick of talking to UnderClan, apparently. She knows Fleetheart would be too distracted with her old comrades on the other side to concentrate on bartering. So she requested you take over for her."

"Really? One bad talk and that's it for her?"

"I guess so. There are Axin Mess survivors on both sides of the bridge, so I imagine it isn't easy for her either, unfortunately. I won't give you details – you look so tired, and I imagine you'll want to sleep for now. You can get them from her when you wake up so... no need to come back here for them."

"Alright. I'll make sure to talk to her once I wake up."

Blackleaf paused, waiting for Solestar to speak. The leader did not move her gaze from the clear-stone, randomly darting her eyes around at anything that moved except her. She slid her paw a bit closer to her, but retracted it. She stood up, shook her fur, and leapt off the table. She turned back before nudging the entrance open.

"Blackleaf?" Solestar said, her voice whisper-low.

The young cat paused and looked back, Solestar still looking at the clearing.

"I'm sorry about that stuff I said earlier. You know I have high hopes for you, right?"

"I know," Blackleaf said.

"And that I... love you, right? You know that?"

"Yes."

"Good. I-I never want you to forget that."

Chapter 5

"I can't just tell them to back off. Look what they did to her!"

The tom moved closer to the pair. The sun was already setting, illuminating the thin wisps of snow that stirred from the ice on the river. There was no wind, but the bridge creaked louder than before. Rattling echoed from below, along with the faintest sound of rushing water. Blackleaf's coat was quickly dotted with snow as she struggled to pin down a she-cat.

"Would you have me just stand here and watch them get away with it?" the tom said, whisking his tail around. "Someone has to make them pay."

"Shut up, Leaftail," Blackleaf growled. "This is your fault, anyway. I told you not to bring her back here."

They were a tree-length from the center of the bridge, where warriors from their own side were packing closer together. A few on the other side were left to meet the formation. The rest were jumping and hollering; Blackleaf heard some of the insults the UnderClan warriors were yelling. They cheered at the sight of reinforcements from their far side.

"Which one of them did this to you?" Leaftail tried his best to keep eyes on the small apprentice under his littermate. "We will make sure to pay them back *twice* in kind."

The apprentice wiggled her head free of Blackleaf's grip. I was standing near the border line, and it just... happened. I barely saw it coming, and by the time I did I was already being dragged away. It felt like something just hit me at first—"

"Sit still, kit," Blackleaf growled. "Or I'll slice *another* piece of your muzzle off."

She struggled moments more, trying to keep the restless apprentice

pinned as she swiped at the air. Blackleaf stamped a free leg down on her tail. She hollered as she shoved a wad of fake-fur in her mouth.

"Hold still, mouse-brain."

She stopped kicking after Leaftail nodded. Letting herself go limp and breathe, Blackleaf went to work rubbing snow over the loose skin on her muzzle. She let the apprentice shake it loose before stamping her head to the ground and wrapped her muzzle. She groaned as her mouth was wrapped shut tighter. Once she tightened it, she reached into her vest's bag and pulled out a clear-stone vial. She placed it carefully in the snow and motioned Leaftail to take her place. The apprentice restrained herself best she could as he forced his paw on her neck.

"You brought this on yourself, kit," Blackleaf growled.

She gripped the vial in her teeth and carefully tilted it until a few drops landed on the wraps. The she-cat shut her eyes tightly, waiting for pain. After several moments, she opened them. She tried mumbling something through her dressings.

"Whatever you said, it'll hurt later. Go straight to the medicine den. *Straight* there. Fleetheart will apply more medicine water when you get there."

"And how is she supposed to eat like that?" Leaftail said.

"She'll be treated this evening, sleep through the night, and have them removed by sun-high tomorrow."

"Hey," Leaftail said, climbing off the apprentice. "You'll make it through this. I don't blame you for what happened. You were just watching your post—"

"Shut, up, Leaftail!" Blackleaf shoved him away.

A pair of warriors walked past him and helped the apprentice up. Leaftail waved his tail at her; her ears perked up and she nodded. The warriors motioned her to follow, but Blackleaf tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'm forgetting something," she said.

She smacked the back of her paw across the fake-fur. The apprentice fell to the ground, groaning and clutching her muzzle. The fake-fur wraps quickly turned red near the gash. The warriors' ears shot up and they approached the downed cat. Blackleaf waved them away, kicking Leaftail in the chest to keep him off. She pressed her paw into the she-cat's chest and leaned close.

"I told you what would happen if you came near these borders again. But you didn't listen, because apparently you have dirt lodged in your brain. That over-enthusiastic devotion you have for my littermate is what got you in this mess, selfishly putting *both* our captured comrades in danger. Your actions make our whole clan look bad. Making the rest look like a bunch of blood-thirsty hounds." She pressed harder. "The dogs are on the other side of the river. You want to join them, I'll be happy to toss your tail to their side so they can take you to them!"

Blackleaf lifted her paw from the she-cat's chest and rubbed it across her face. She winced and swiped it at the pain of pressuring her wraps. The apprentice scrambled to her paws and began walking away. The medicine cat smacked the 'X' on her thigh.

"You don't do those marks justice."

The apprentice's ears were flat; she did not even flinch when Blackleaf hit her. She silenced Leaftail before he could object. She motioned her tail in a circle and pointed towards camp. The warriors, frozen during her torrent, kept their tails low as they flanked each side of the apprentice. She did not look back, just keeping her head low and walking towards the far side of the bridge. Leaftail was looking at the border; some of the warriors had watched what happened, to the delight of the UnderClan cats on the other side. Blackleaf started walking towards the border. He followed, growling.

"You embarrassed her in front of her peers," he hissed. "What is *the matter* with you?!"

"I told her what would happen if she went back," Blackleaf said. "I

just want to make sure she isn't influencing the other kits to do stupid stuff like you encourage when they become apprentices. Those kits are her peers, not these warriors."

"You could've talked to her in private—"

"She needs to be ashamed to learn this lesson."

"You hit her!"

"And I hit her wound. Nothing she won't heal through."

Some of the warriors had spotted the approaching pair. The UnderClan cats formed up tighter to match their opponents. A gray tabby cat pushed its way to the front, the tan bald spots across its face visible even a couple tree-lengths away. The evening light was being diffused by the wisps of clouds that floated through the sky. She quickened her pace. Leaftail moved closer and lowered his voice.

"That was uncalled for," he said. "Medicine cat or not, I can't condone you berating apprentices."

"I don't care what you think," Blackleaf snapped. "This isn't just about that kit's pride anymore. You heard me lecturing her. UnderClan has both of ours captive now. They just got more leverage in this."

"What does that have to do with the—"

"Forget about the apprentice *for one moment*!" she growled faintly. "You can feel sorry for her when I'm done here."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What I should've done the first time the truce was ignored."

The formation parted to let her through. Blackleaf looked at the imaginary line separating her a few tail-lengths from the UnderClan warriors. They backed away at the sight of the medicine cat approaching. The tabby she-cat stayed, baring her fangs. Windstripe's eyes glistened against the warm light; they were open

wide. Leaftail had pushed his way forward as well. Her attention immediately shifted to him.

"You can stare at my littermate anytime," she said. "Right now, you're talking to me."

"So, you're Blackleaf," Windstripe growled. "Infamous shrew of the Clan of False Shadows. They even gave you a little vest to better keep you away from camp."

Some of the UnderClan warriors stepped back at their senior's remarks.

"Everyone here needs to disperse," Blackleaf yelled. "Shadow and under cats. Your medicine cats agreed to a truce along with ours. So knock this off."

"We aren't fighting. Just defending our border that one of *your* kits tried to cross."

Some of the UnderClan cats meowed in agreement. The Shadows hissed back. The medicine cat took a few steps over the imaginary line; the crowd hushed.

"See? The Shadow cats always break the truce. Even now you stand two paws in our territory."

Blackleaf moved closer to the senior warrior. "My borders are bound by the Stars. Not by you or the leaders of the clans."

"Hah! The words of a kit." Windstripe's warriors moved closer to the young cat. "How about you get your head out of the sky... get *off* our territory."

Windstripe barely dodged Blackleaf's paw, leaping back even further. Her warriors' ears shot up. Some started growling.

"You want the words of a medicine cat?" Blackleaf said. "We have nine of yours captive. Four are under ten moons old... perhaps it would be safer if we moved them outside."

"What kind of medicine cat are you?" Windstripe growled.

"Your leader and medicine cats were the ones who called for the truce. One of the captives must be really important. It'd be safer. Then they're away from our warriors... I remember, yesterday, one of yours threatening to mate with that she-kit you just injured. Perhaps if the favor was repaid in kind—"

"If you're so bound by your Stars, you would never threaten such a repulsive thing."

"Why not? Several of your warriors said they'd do it if it was a shadow cat. I could easily arrange for our own to show them the consequences of their actions. Such an action is only done by those with no regard for the warrior code. Isn't that correct for silverpelt clans?"

Several of the UnderClan warrior's tails fell as they took a few steps back.

"And breaking the warrior code, if I remember the stories from others, is grounds to be sent to the Place of No Stars on death. So your warriors do not care about joining StarClan, nor do they have any regard for their ancient code. Better, at that rate, that I have the youngest of our captives banished or killed before such a thing can happen. After all, we do not follow the code—"

"I don't want to hear any more of these lies!" Windstripe hissed. "Medicine cats don't force mate. And they certainly don't kill."

"No, *your* medicine cats don't kill. But we all walk where we please and demand respect when present. And when we make a request, we expect it to be followed. The rest of your clan knows this. But you don't. Where does that put you in relation to the Stars?"

Windstripe motioned her warriors to back off; they were already a tail-length behind her. Blackleaf's comrades started hissing at their opponents. She waved her tail and silenced them.

"I don't fear you," Windstripe said, "or the Stars. The only wrath there would be comes from your dull claws and cowardly threats... before this war is over, I'm going to tear your littermate's head off! Then I'm going to do the same to you."

She motioned her warriors away from the border, claws dug beneath the thin layer of snow. The UnderClan warriors hissed towards their enemies and slowly departed. The Shadow cats began to cheer, many throwing around insults. Leaftail stepped forward, Blackleaf returning to her clan's side.

"I... don't believe it," he said.

"What? That silverpelt clans are *that* superstitious? Our own are, too. But now I don't have to explain to Solestar how you broke the truce again. Your welcome, you badger-hearted fool."

She flicked her tail as she stepped in front of her comrades. "You idiots should be just as embarrassed as the under cats. Breaking the truce puts the two captives on their side in danger. And now that they have them both, they've evened their position in the talks with ours. Don't mess this up before they even really get started."

The warriors began to return to their positions. Many of their tails fell. Others had scowls on their face. Blackleaf nodded and started walking back, when Leaftail slapped her tail out of the way and leaned close.

"You made one decent call and two stupid ones," he whispered. "You might've stopped a fight, but you made an enemy of the warriors here and made a promise to get our comrades back."

"Whose side are you on?" Blackleaf spat. "That's a good thing. I intend on getting them back."

"I respect that you're a medicine cat. But the position you hold is no longer centered around StarClan. The Shadows and under cats have been fighting since before Solestar was born. And there hasn't been one word from above. I'm trying to help you... look around. Silverpelt, ancestor, hardly matters. StarClan is resented on both sides of this border."

He shoved past his littermate, running to catch up to his warriors. Blackleaf began her walk to the end of the bridge, glancing back. The wind had started kicking up loose snow on UnderClan's side. They had returned to their lookout patrols at the ledges of the

bridge. Some gave mean glances through it, all directed at her. She turned to her side. Her comrades also returned to their duties, the oversight of Leaftail keeping them vigilant. As she continued, she looked closer at them. The warriors were standing at attention. Many had their claws sheathed and their fur lay flat. Their eyes – when she caught glimpse of them – were casually gazing about. Not one had glanced back at the border. Blackleaf looked back again. The same angry glances, the same patrol routes. And forward, her tame comrades. Her fur started to creep up under her vest and her ears flattened. Looked back, then forward. No matter how far she got from them, no matter how much snow obscured her vision, the same angry colors of the UnderClan warriors kept staring back at her.

Chapter 6

The lone warrior stared off in the distance. He pretended she was not there, fixating himself on the glistening moon or the light shining across the distant bridge. Slowly – never taking her gaze off the sentry – she shook the snow from her white fur. His eyes curiously darted over to her. One look into her own forced his away.

"There's been no activity for half a moon," he said. "And Fleetheart already checked their health."

The medicine cat dropped the mouse from her jaws.

"Do I look like I'm here to check on their health?" Blackleaf snapped. "I'll be feeding them tonight. Got a problem with that?"

The tom's tail curled around his leg. "Nope. Not at all—"

"Good." The warrior jumped out the way of her tail; she nodded.

She snatched up the mouse and made her way towards her destination. It was nestled on the side wall of the smaller twoleg nest; a hole was what the warrior was guarding. The wall of the massive nest was not breached, but the ground next to it was, dim light emitting from it. The area around the nest was deliberately cleared of snow, the rest being cleared by the heat from the hole in the ground. She could hear the small patter of water dripping and flowing downward. Blackleaf was able to squeeze through the small hole with no adjustment, glancing at the warrior before continuing. He had just taken his eyes off her; she growled under her teeth.

She was unphased by the stale air that quickly eroded the fresh night. The bits of snow on her paws melted away, and she ruffled her fur with the wave of warmth that washed over her. She walked a tree-length down a straight ramp made of red-stone debris, the wall tightening the further down she went. The red-stone revealed its true shape when the ramp stopped, a tube the width of a large

tree. The walls were smooth, the brownish hue illuminated by a bright twoleg light. Its yellow glow drowned out whatever was left of the moonlight. The last holes in the ceiling were passed when she reached the light. The way forward was covered by rubble, leaving a hard right the only way to go. The passage grew a bit narrower with less holes in the ceiling, each of them dripping water from the uncleared snow above. There were a couple more lights revealing the slimy walls from the water. The air went from stale to sour, but it was warm. Blackleaf took time to stretch and shake the water drops from her fur before approaching the two guarding the middle of the tunnel.

She dropped the mouse in a puddle. "I'd like to speak with them alone for a while."

The two apprentices looked at each other, then at her. "They may be weak, but they still could be dangerous to those who aren't warri—"

"I can take care of myself." Blackleaf picked up the mouse and shoved past. They looked at each other again and slowly walked to the right turn. One of them nodded before disappearing around the corner.

"*All* the way out!" Blackleaf snapped.

She listened close for the paw steps of the two warriors as they sloshed through the tiny steam she carefully avoided earlier. It stopped after just a short while.

"Paranoid," she growled under her breath. "They won't hear *everything* from back there, at least."

Deeper into the tunnel, the twoleg lights grew dimmer, one flickering. Blackleaf could only see to the third light before the tunnel grew too small and dark. She stopped short of that and looked to her right; several dull silvertubes blocked her path, bent from the pressure of the tunnel. They were still far enough apart for a single cat to fit through the middle. She dropped the mouse at the edge of the tubes and swat it through. It was quickly snatched up by claws and pulled to the back. She could hear the crunching of the

mouse's body as it was torn to bits; she even heard the blood being lapped up.

"My, my, an extra serving. Aren't we generous tonight... oh?" the scratchy voice grew from a whisper. "You're not Fleetheart. You're the new one, aren't you?" The cat who emerged from the shadows was much larger than Blackleaf. Her ribs were pressed against her gray, muddy fur. Her green eyes were narrow slits staring down back at her. She shook her fur, flinging water droplets about.

"Watch the shaking, or I'll have you beaten," Blackleaf growled.

"Well you're much feistier than the other two," the voice said. "I wouldn't have to shake like this if you kept us in a dry place."

"If you were in a dry place, you would be stuck drinking dirty snow instead of water."

"This is less drinking water and more licking wet rocks." The large she-cat moved closer, sticking her head through the tubes. There were several scratches on her muzzle, along with a bite mark below her jaw. "What kind of clan keeps a place around just to hold captives?"

"Well it's no good for sleeping because the mud holds a scent."

"It only holds a scent because we have to take turns making dirt in a hole in the corner. You know, it's big enough for a kit to fall down. And we don't even know where it goes."

"Only one way to find out."

The she-cat's ears perked up. "You're just going to be so much fun... What do you want? You didn't come down here just to break your rules and feed us twice in the same night. I'm sure you're breaking your rules to do this, right?"

"You're just going to answer some questions." Blackleaf's muscles bulged under her fur, letting her tail drop in a puddle behind her.

The she-cat nodded. "Very impressive physique, but what do you expect to do with those kit-claws of yours? There are five warriors

here."

"The other four are apprentices," Blackleaf growled. "And if they all look like you, it's going to be an uphill fight."

"You're nothing like the apprentices they watch us with. Or Flyfoot and Fleetheart. But *they* would be an uphill fight. You're like fighting a kit."

"Just answer the questions and stop messing around."

"I know you're angrier than the others they've sent, but no medicine cat is *this* upset at anything. You have StarClan and all that. See, this is the problem with letting medicine cats mate. It distracts them when they don't get enough—"

Blackleaf slashed across the tubes separating them. The she-cat leapt back to avoid it, her comrades immediately helping her up. Blackleaf's eyes glanced across the passage to the corner and fixed on it for a while. One small splash in the distance.

"A little touchy about mating, are we?" the she-cat said. "And your clanmates certainly *aren't* in a rush to save you. I figured with your looks your clanmates would love to be the ones to rescue you from the mean old under cats. But now I think you're kind of just a vixen."

She reared up onto the bars as far as the roof of the tunnel would let her, standing above the captives.

"You know, I can make things much worse for you down here."

"You know, you're terrible at interrogation." The captive sat, flicking her tail. "Why don't you just ask the questions already. It isn't in you to torture and you're too easy a target for me. I thought that's what you came down here for in the first place."

She took a deep breath and slid off the tubes. Blackleaf sat with a bit of distance between herself and the enclosure.

"It would be great if we could start off on names."

"See? There we go. When you aren't making a fuss, you start to make sense. You already know my name, the False Shadow. And I already know yours, Blackpaw."

The medicine cat growled, holding her tongue and letting her fur flatten.

"My name isn't Blackpaw anymore."

The other cats within the prison started whispering. Some of them bobbed their heads. Even the False Shadow backed away from the tubes a bit, ears perked.

"What if we just started with your name?" Blackleaf said. "Your *real* name."

"First, I want to guess yours," the she-cat said. "If you are now a medicine cat, then using the ancestor clan surname for your rank would be a reasonable assumption. Your name is Blackleaf, now. Mystery solved."

"Back to *my* questions!" Blackleaf snapped. "What is—"

"You know, that tom guarding the entrance to this place seemed really timid when I brought up the name Blackpaw, once. That had to be, what, a half-moon ago when he was down here. I talked the poor tom's ear off but he really did not like that name. And I noticed several scars on the inside of his legs. He's lucky they're just on his legs but... was that you?"

Blackleaf smashed her paws against the tubes and hissed as close as she dared to the captives. Water struck the she-cat's face. Her comrades immediately stood and yowled. Their fur spiked, looking ready to pounce. The two apprentices rushed around the corner, stopping halfway down the passage.

"Is everything—"

"I'm fine!" Blackleaf snapped. "Go *back* to where you were."

The two looked at each other, and slowly padded back to where they came from.

"*Go!"* She screamed, the pair disappearing again. She waited until the pawsteps fell silent.

The she-cat's tail stopped flicking. "I know this isn't a game of hunt-the-kittypet, but you haven't managed to get one question in, aside from my name. I don't want to see you hurt yourself on these tubes."

"You seem reasonable," Blackleaf said, "not like the normal dogs that pass as your comrades. Senior warrior, I'm guessing? How about you tell me your real name and what *just you* were doing in our territory and, in exchange, I'll let one of these apprentices go. Something more brought you here than just scouting the layout of the backlands. What drove you to come here? And what causes your thoughtless behavior towards one of the ranking cats in the area?"

Eyes from the shadows of the prison narrowed. The two younger warriors by the she-cat's side moved forward as she rubbed her paw through the mud beneath her. The others were staring down the medicine cat.

"You know, that offer wasn't a bad idea," the she-cat said. "Terrible for your clan, but I was actually thinking you were going to start making some moves in favor of knowledge rather than the war. But you have no such wisdom... I guess even the Stars can mess up."

"What did you say?" The hairs on Blackleaf's back shot up.

"No respect, no wisdom. What was Fleetheart thinking? How are you even a medicine cat? At best, you're a hot-headed apprentice promoted to a position involving topics you're too shrew to even *want* to comprehend."

Blackleaf hissed. "Don't you *dare* mock my connection to StarClan... you really should just answer my questions."

"You know what? I think I will." The other cat waved away her warriors, spitting and coughing a bit before continuing. The scowl on her brow grew deeper. "You know who made me come here? One of our medicine cats. Me, and no one else. There was something here and they had to follow it, but couldn't. I was sent

instead—"

"That's a lie. No medicine cat would ever order—"

"That 'something' got me captured, beaten, sick, and now tortured by the rambling growls of an underage medicine cat who has no idea how to act like one. I'm supposed to be their champion, secretly chosen by our own to do something. I don't know. What a joke this is. I think I would've been safer eating crowfood for a whole moon than listen to such theoretical ramblings from one of our own."

The warriors at her side hesitated, backing away from the tubes and curling their tails.

"But what do I know?" she continued. "I'm just a set of claws to them. Why did I even listen? StarClan is silent and has been since the beginning of the Great Sky War. But what would you know about that? I may have been fooled into your clan's captivity but you... you're a poor excuse for a medicine cat. And if you are the future of our relationship with the Stars then our faith truly is doomed. Starting with mine!"

Blackleaf slashed her claws across the bars, then through them. The older cat huddled away but took several blows. She screeched and shoved her way deeper into the prison. One of the warriors leapt from the shadows and slashed in her direction, pushing her away. Blackleaf charged back and slammed into the bars, smashing her paw into the she-cat's ribs. The warrior turned and kicked her in the shoulder. She slid back far enough for one of her comrades to stand in the way of her and the tubes. The other was inspecting her.

"It's just water, right?" Blackleaf silently mouthed. "Just water."

"What was that?" one of the apprentices said. "Are you okay, Blackleaf?"

She backed into the wall and slid down it before tilting her head to the left and looking at her shoulder. Her eyes widened at the small drop of red growing between her hairs.

"No, no, no," Blackleaf whispered. She shoved past the apprentice and walked down the tunnel, gasping. "Not like this."

"Which one was..."

Her comrade's words faded away. The sharp ringing in her ear drowned everything out except the pattering of her blood. It was a torrent to everything else, the sound of the drop flattening each hair it came in contact with. The way it spread to multiples around it and expanded. Her vision blurred until it was just red and white. Her heartbeat thundered throughout her body. She scrambled to regain balance as she bumped into the wall, the left turn the only way to go. Her head shot up and she disappeared past it.

"Hold..."

The ringing still drowned out her comrades. Blackleaf's vision returned as she rushed down the tunnel, splashing through all the puddles and mud. She darted up the rubble pile leading to the surface and into the sentry guarding it. Both scrambled to their paws, but Blackleaf sprinted away before he could even look at her. Her head was pinned to her shoulder; she could feel the warmth of her blood on her cheek. She jumped into a pile of snow on the side of the medicine den and buried herself. Her vision was blacked out until she poked her head through. Nothing but white and the blues and greens of eyes. She took deep breaths and tried to focus her vision, but nothing came of them. The white surrounded her. She refused to look at her shoulder, but could feel it finally cooling down. Her claws were scratching against an invisible stone in front of her, digging her further into the snow. She shut her eyes again, trying to control her breathing. More deep breaths, more scratching.

Chapter 7

The wind rattled the supports of the bridge, loosing snow on its surface below. It blew directly across the area instead of down, keeping it scent-free from any prior markings. The thick overcast made those moving around shiver at each pile of snow they had to shake from their pelts, the sunlight nowhere to be found. Despite the wind, it was still calm enough to hear the gurgles of the river beneath the loose ice chunks. Several warriors were on their respective sides; a few on the Shadow's side kept an eye on a gathering of cats at the bank below. The rest were sitting a tree-length behind the two medicine cats in a line that spanned the entire width of the bridge, blocking the view behind them from the other side. UnderClan had a mass of cats surrounding two in their center and slowly escorting them to the invisible border line. One of them had an unmistakably sharp gaze and face scars. Windstripe's companion had a limp and shuttered at the sharp whistle of a sky-monster whenever it passed by. The mass of guards parted and let the pair approach the middle.

The young one shook herself free of the snow. "Took them long enough," Blackleaf growled.

"Make other side wait," her older companion said. "Standard tactic from *hamburg* clans. Now we cold and they not as cold. You have two eyes. What you see? That Blueclaw with her?"

"Yeah. Windstripe and Blueclaw."

Blackleaf only recognized her by description. The slight blue tint in her fur made her stand out against the white. Her limp was none too severe, but her fur was standing on end. Her legs were shaking just enough to throw off her otherwise perfect posture. Despite her gray muzzle, she looked ready to pounce.

"We see a few of ours, alive." Windstripe said. "You see yours? Both of them are alive."

"They look tired and sad," Flyfoot said.

"They've been underground for a while and aren't used to it. Now let's just get this over with."

The four of them moved into position; the warriors flanking both parties moved further back. UnderClan spread out in a line to mimic the Shadow's formation, leaving enough space between them to keep a pair of guarded cats in view. Both had their heads down; the large, brown wildcat's head was down further to keep him from towering over the rest. The other white cat glanced about occasionally. She arched herself up and attempted to look over the Shadow's formation to no avail; Blackleaf could see her shaking. Windstripe waited for her older comrade to be seated before doing so herself. Blackleaf did the same, but Flyfoot did not. She would not stop glancing between the UnderClan warriors and her two on the other side.

Blueclaw cleared her throat. "This is not the f-first time we've tried this. Make sure it goes better this time, wildcat." Her voice was raspy even after clearing her throat.

"It takes two make smooth talks, mouse-brain," Flyfoot spat.

"We are already off to a-a beautiful start, wildcat."

"This go better if you let us speak with real medicine cat. Know it not you. Not looking and smelling like that."

Blueclaw ran her paw through her twisted fur. "I am the real medicine cat. You are just too small to accept it."

"I accept it when it true. Bring on real medicine cat."

"How about you... y-you..."

Many of the warriors around looked up at the sky. Echoing and invisible, a screech tore through the wind and creaking, a gray mass moving through the clouds too quick to follow overhead. As the sky-monster moved further away, Blackleaf could make out the hiss coming from Blueclaw, who was curled up in the snow. Windstripe whispered something to her and rested her paw on her back; it was

swat away. She returned to sitting upright and shook the snow from her belly, snapping herself back into composure.

Blackleaf focused back on both. "Maybe we could consider this a simple trade? Your leader was the one who called the truce in the first place."

"That's not possible," Blueclaw said. "They have been in o-our territory for quite some time. All we know they know is their own names. All they repeat, all day."

"How much could they possibly know? Angelika can't sniff out the difference between a tree and a dog, and Molenose has no claws. He wouldn't survive alone in your territory—"

"Don't make a fool of yourself, little one," Blueclaw spat, baring her fangs. "He survived just fine for a whole moon without his claws. Two days and nights on the run without his claws. I know how the wildcats track pursuers. Hide their dirt, leave no trail. They can be foul *and* odorless."

Flyfoot's paw ground through the snow. "If you know tracking methods, why you not catch sooner? Molenose should been no threat."

"Wildcats are wildcats. They are not good for much other than-than fighting and tracking. If one wanted to hide from us, they could."

"There is half-wildcat in your territory. Use him to track other."

"We do not have such blood in our clan."

"Horse-dirt! Heavyclaw over there, because you and other Axin Mess survivors over there. You had chance to catch him. Now bitter you didn't. Take little one's offer and be done with it."

Blackleaf tapped the wildcat on the shoulder; no response.

"The more lies you keep putting out the harder it is for you to get your mate-buddy back." The older cat's leg began to twitch. "You-you expect me to believe two of your warriors spent a whole moon in our territory doing nothing?"

Flyfoot glanced up when she heard the hissing, as did Windstripe. Blackleaf watched the older cat freeze again. Her paws and tail lay low as she listened for the whine of the sky-monster. The sound curled her tail and wretched her ears. She leaned up and hissed short bursts, swiping at the sky each time. Again, Windstripe rested a paw on her back; Blueclaw was slower to hit it away.

"Here we go again," Flyfoot growled. "See this with Fleetheart, sometimes Wolfgang, and you. So much for littermate of smartest cat to ever live... bet Panzer would be over it now—"

Blackleaf slammed her paw. "That's enough out of you, Flyfoot! You and Blueclaw are getting us nowhere."

"Watch mouth, dull-claw!" Flyfoot hissed. "Axin Mess is no joke."

"You and Blueclaw can argue about it all you want. Just let me actually do what *you* wanted done so bad."

"I would not be here if it was not f-for Clementstar," Blueclaw said. "If you want to speak to Windstripe, go ahead."

"I have nothing to say to you, *little* one," Windstripe said.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you at the bridge yesterday. But your clan called for these talks. So let's get them over with."

Flyfoot was still glaring at her, but she held her words. Blueclaw was half crouched, waiting for a sky-monster to double back overhead. Windstripe had her fangs bore and was ready to pounce on her.

"Good. I have your attention," Blackleaf said. "The way I see it, your group saw much of our territory as well. Our backlands are a mess of destroyed twoleg structures you can hardly make out from your side of the river. Your 'backlands' are just snowed-over grass fields with a few twoleg structures that, as far as we know, belong to the dogs. Both areas are equally bad because they are difficult to memorize and navigate."

"Hah, look at the scowl on Flyfoot's face," Blueclaw purred. "I will entertain this. What about the fact that Molenose is a veteran

navigator and Angelika's fur is white? Solestar clearly sent them over as spies."

"I tell you last time we here," Flyfoot said. "They in love. They disobey orders and ran away together. End up in your lands by mistake."

Blueclaw nodded. "It was a funnier lie when it was just you. You expect me to believe that Angelika would go so low as to run off and mate with a badger-cat like Molenose? I have seen kits lie better than you, wildcat."

"Name is Flyfoot. Start using—"

"If you get to believe that I am not one of UnderClan's medicine cats, then-then I get to believe that Solestar sent these two spies over here to map our territory... Actually, the look you had on your face when you said they were in love was priceless. It is actually you, is it not? Guess that 'thing' you call a comrade is the only one big enough to mount you without hurting themselves."

"If I still had claws, I'd tear you a—"

"Flyfoot, quiet," Blackleaf growled. "Windstripe at least think about my proposal. You know I'm right."

"And there, you lost me a little." Blueclaw cleared her throat. Bristling her fur to clear away snow, several bald patches briefly revealed themselves. "You are even b-better at irritating this wildcat than I am. I commend that. But even s-she is better at being a medicine cat than you. I am thankful StarClan is silent and could not officially make you one."

"How dare you insult StarClan, *hündin*," Blackleaf hissed. "You insult the one who offers to give your comrades back? That's further than you ever got with Flyfoot."

"It was never going to go anywhere, and twoleg-speak insults does not make it go, either. Use your brain, little one. Yours know things, o-ours know things. We will just argue in circles."

"Don't forget, Clementstar and your medicine cats were the ones

who called for the truce. Solestar could start killing them and it wouldn't matter to me. Starting with the fowl-mouthed old she-cat I spoke to last night."

Windstripe growled. "Don't even talk about fowl-mouthed. You're the worst of it."

"I am trying to be the mature one here and offer you a solution," Blackleaf growled. "What if you just traded those without experience? You have four apprentices over here. Trade them for just Angelika. Her skills are equivalent to theirs. None of them could track or memorize like a warrior. They'd know nothing, and we would actually get somewhere."

Blueclaw, looking away from the group, nodded. "It would be a shame for you to lose such a seasoned warrior with a unique skill. This could work if we got more than just the apprentices back."

"Something can be arranged. It would sure get us out of the cold faster."

"Not treat comrades like objects, little one," Flyfoot growled. "You not just abandon him."

"Oh look, she does love him. How repulsive," Blueclaw said.

"Still have fangs. Still can leap!"

"Flyfoot, please," Blackleaf said. "Angelika is no proper warrior. The apprentices we captured are frightened kits. There is a lack of skill and discipline all around. They're useless as captives. And we can finally get somewhere in this truce before our warriors go back to fighting. It would please the Stars knowing that not every cat born in this area has a desire to kill."

"Since when would you care about such things," Windstripe said. "You threaten cats all the time."

"But I am a medicine cat, not a warrior. And like I told you earlier, StarClan defines my borders. Not this war. What about you, Blueclaw. This acceptable?"

The old cat was staring at the overcast. "Trade, no trade. As long as I am done talking to you, I do not care w-what you do, anymore."

"We want to see the rest of them first," Windstripe said.

"Bring our comrades forward more, then we'll show you the rest," Blackleaf growled.

"Medicine cat my tail," the warrior said.

She whisked her tail back and forth. Several of the warriors broke rank to wave their tails the same way. The ones behind them parted and let the pair of cats walk forward. Angelika padded quickly, but was slowed by Molenose. She meekly fell in behind him; he moved until the warriors glared, stopping a tree-length from the border. The Shadow's warriors stepped forward, stopped by Blackleaf's gesture. The captive pair still looked tired, but kept their heads up. Molenose had a red eye and new scars running down his chest. Angelika just kept her tail between her legs and her ears down. She looked at Blackleaf; Molenose and Flyfoot were locked.

"See," Windstripe said. "Perfectly—"

"Hey, I see that," Flyfoot hissed. "His eye red. You said no torture last time. Why you hit him?"

"He's made several attempts to escape. And he isn't small."

"It not take that and scratches like that to keep him. You have him. Why you hurt him?!"

"He fought back, obviously. We had to keep him from doing so."

Blackleaf put her paw on the wildcat's. "It's fine, Flyfoot. He looks fine."

"You see blood, you say look fine." She smacked the young cat's paw away, flinging snow in her face. "You see nothing."

"What of Angelika?" Blackleaf said. "Why didn't you torture her?"

Windstripe's ears twitched. "We didn't torture anyone, just as we

said when our medicine cats called the truce. Angelika surrendered the moment she was caught... kittypets."

"That 'kittypet' evaded your patrols for a whole moon."

"She got lucky and had camouflage. Now bring out our clanmates."

Blueclaw was still disinterested. Flyfoot and Molenose were still locked on each other. Blackleaf motioned her tail towards her. The line surrounded the nine behind them, marching them forward and forcing them single file. Blueclaw's eyes shot right onto the older she-cat in the center. The other captives kept themselves a tail-length from her, no matter how much the Shadow warriors tried to keep them in line. Even Blackleaf got a good look at them for the first time in the light. All of them were just as thin as the one she only knew as the False Shadow, who was staring straight through her. The ribs on the apprentices had shown as well, more so than the others. They were shaking, tails wrapped up with the older ones. Three of them had white fake-fur wraps around their bellies and legs.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Blueclaw hissed. "I-I can see their injuries from here. Shadows are no less barbaric than LeafClan."

Flyfoot growled, taking a step towards Blueclaw.

"They got those injuries when they were captured," Blackleaf said. "They put up a fight and had to be subdued. Just like Molenose."

"Did Solestar tell you that?" Blueclaw growled. "She lied. I guarantee it."

Windstripe, ignoring the conversation, reared up to see over Flyfoot. "Something's not right... what's happening to her?"

Blackleaf turned around; her comrades were backing away from the False Shadow. She began walking forward, eyes still piercing through the young medicine cat's. A trickle of blood from her mouth doubled in size. She froze and hacked it all up. Her head began to shake. The Shadow warriors backed away. They waved their comrades over as she began vomiting. Even the other captives

did not rush to her side, the older cats keeping the apprentices at bay. The blood trickle returned when she was finished. Her eyes began to close and she fell to her side, lifeless in the snow. Flyfoot growled, running over to the limp cat.

Blueclaw hissed, her clawless paws pulling Blackleaf close by her fur. "Murders! You-you're the same savages you've always been!"

A pair of warriors shoved themselves between the two and separated them, pushing Blueclaw back to her side. Several UnderClan warriors approached the border as well, Windstripe motioning them to hold. Angelika and Molenose quickly disappeared in the mounting UnderClan formation; the same was done to the group of captives, all but the False Shadow. Blackleaf approached her and was kicked back by Flyfoot.

"Stay away," she hissed. "You aren't immune."

All she could do was watch the UnderClan captives being taken away. They glanced behind them, eyeing their fallen comrade. Blackleaf moved towards the edge of the bridge with the other warriors. In the corner of her eye she caught a group of cats watching from a clearing below. She could barely make out the six of them walking away, almost missing one because it had white fur. The warriors on the sides of the bridge were watching them. The ones at the border had forced two UnderClan cats back into their own territory. More of them put a barrier between the captives and the border; UnderClan also had a mob of cats hissing and shouting at her comrades.

Something grabbed her shoulder and slapped her across the face. Even the wildcat's thick fur did not mitigate the blow. Blackleaf fell, looking up into a single blue eye.

"Don't *ever* talk me like that again," she growled.

Blackleaf had not scrambled to her feet before Flyfoot's cropped tail smacked her just as hard. Only when there was distance between them did she stand up. No one helped her; amidst the situation, she saw no one looking at her. She shook the snow from her fur, looking over the side of the bridge again. Her comrades had left,

and the group on the river bank had disappeared.

Chapter 8

The snowfall was just a trickle of what it had been earlier. It would have been pitch black if not for the twoleg lights spaced out above the thunderpath. The moon was completely hidden behind the low-hanging clouds. No matter how fast they moved, not one bit of moonlight shined through. She walked close to the right, though she knew no monsters would ever come by. The twoleg structure's charred remains and half-standing foundations were obscured by the dark, but she knew where larger piles of rubble were and stepped around them, careful not to snag the clean medicine vest wrapped around her. It was dotted white, but the color was too obscure to see. Blackleaf walked past the remains of a red-stone wall. A pile of snow her height along it had paw prints all over it. The scent it carried was thicker in some parts behind the wall, warning others away. Blackleaf ignored it.

Flyfoot and Blueclaw almost ruined any chance of this going well, Blackleaf thought. And Fleetheart said Blueclaw was the compassionate one. Former pacifist clan my tail! She was angrier than Flyfoot. She didn't even try to get her comrades back. She didn't care. And how dare she call me 'little one'. This 'little one' would like to shove her claws so far down your throat that so that I don't have to hear you speak... And that was just the first day!

She dropped her tail low, stalking some imaginary prey. Baring her fangs, she caught the eye of one of her comrades. He averted his and continued off into the distance. His ears twitched at the growl she didn't notice she was making. She closed her eyes as she approached a large twoleg nest.

There are an infinite moon's worth of ancestors up there and they aren't saying a word. And I'm stuck down here being mocked by two old cats arguing about a clan war from half a lifetime ago! I got to this point as quick as I could. I won't let them, or a sick captive, ruin it.

Blackleaf opened her eyes and parted her fur, glancing back on the 'X' scars on her thighs. The red-stone wall was whole where she

was, along with the twoleg nest it was in front of. The silvertubes that blocked off the middle had fallen to the ground, but even they were branded with her clan's mark. Matching her thigh, they were all over the walls and tubes. The markings of foreign cats briefly caught her nose.

The Star Covenant isn't supposed to be marking this close to our border... if our warriors weren't afraid of that stupid odd-eyed kit—

A she-cat was sitting on the wall. She was big for a kit of her age, matching her own size. Her long, white coat glistened with the twoleg light she sat under. A gust of wind blew away the foreign marking, and the scent of her freshly groomed fur took its place. Perfectly balanced and still, her eyes, one green and one blue, stared into her own with a passion she had only seen from toms. For a while they just gawked at each other. The odd-eyed cat barely moved, and Blackleaf shook away snow occasionally. But her face grew tense. She was unintimidated. Blackleaf loosed a hiss, even tossing snow as high as she could, and continued on her way.

They say she's responsible for the blackcough. Blackleaf growled. *But I know better... a Rye incarnate. Cats can't return to life after death. And they certainly don't have powers. Fleetheart told me this was basic information in hamburg, Stars or not. But I guess they're quick to forget. I wasn't even born then and I chose to learn, to remember. They can, too. All should know that little weird-eyed kit for what she is. A lie.*

She took one last look at Rye. The kit was still fixated on her.

"You're lucky you're sitting on a shared border," Blackleaf growled, "or I'd hop up there and swipe those eyes from you! *Then try staring at me."*

Looking ahead, the lights were faded and flickering. Rubble from nearby nests had blocked the main path. She let the scent of the kit fade away as those of both friendly and foreign cats returned. The kit still stared, so she kept moving forward.

That False Shadow knows something. No way she's just another warrior. First thing I should do is try to get some answers out of her. An apology for what she said about me, even. She has to have some kind of theory

on StarClan. She got too upset over it, over me, to not care. And why take apprentices, or a large group at all? Underground tunnels only go so far into our territory, and Solestar blocks any we find. Unless she had help from the Covenant or found another route, she shouldn't have lasted a quarter-moon above ground.

She parted the fur on her shoulder. The dent of a deep scratch from the UnderClan captive was still there, long since treated.

The timing of it all. A plague, a break in the war, that weird-eyed kit. Even though I don't want to think that false prophet has anything to do with StarClan's absence, she is affecting our comrade's morale. Who knows how that's affecting their faith? Even Solestar's is faltering. And I seem to be the only one that cares... First, our comrades on the other side of the border. The other senior members want them back, and as long as we are in a truce, I can move around easier without having to be called to deal with injuries like when I was an apprentice. Clementstar better still want his warriors back, even after one of them got sick.

She glanced up. The clouds had started thinning in some parts, revealing the black sky above them. The loose snow on the ground shifted at the incoming wind. She turned around and started retracing her steps. The she-kit was still staring at her from atop the wall.

Chapter 9

"You there!" her voice was almost as soft as her age implied. "Is something wrong with your shoulder?"

Blackleaf's pink eyes shined under the twoleg light. She lingered for a moment but continued on her way.

"I only ask if you are okay." There was less force in her voice. "My name is Rye. I only wish to help you."

The young medicine cat turned towards the odd-eyed cat and loosed a hiss that stood the hairs on her back. Her heart was racing as she took in the sight of Blackleaf's anger. She smashed her paw through the snow, throwing it far behind but failing to reach her, then went on her way again. Another irritated glance backward was the last sign she would get from her before ignoring her completely. Rye never took her senses off the she-cat. She examined her up and down, watching her every move.

Rye's tail rubbed against her paw. *Only three days a medicine cat. Eleven moons an apprentice, fourteen moons old. Mother is Christa, an Axin Mess survivor of Hamburg, father is unknown to us. Has a sole-surviving littermate, Leaftail, senior warrior and the Shadow's leader at the bridge border with UnderClan. She is blood-related to the infamous Littlestar and shares her birth defect of a near-scentless body. And she was born albino, making her stealth perfect in leafbare. I would jump down and get a closer look, but her allies may be nearby... It is strange for either of the clan's medicine cats to appear alone during the night. But I was told she was like that as a kit, too.*

Standing from her spot on the stone border, she tried to follow Blackleaf, who was once again crouching and stalking imaginary prey.

Her attitude puts her at constant odds with the Shadow's other medicine cats, Flyfoot, and Fleetheart. It may be she is so absorbed in thought about StarClan that she has no time to watch her demeanor. She is

zealous when it comes to her faith, closely following her clan's ancestor beliefs. Covenant intelligence speaks little of her beauty, only that she rejects all of her potential mates. She entrances all she passes, even if just for a moment... or maybe that is just how I see her.

She reached the end of the red-stone wall, choosing not to leap off and follow. She focused on Blackleaf's thigh before she got too far away, the 'X' marking of her clan impossible to see from where she was.

She walks with such confidence. Like a thought does not enter her mind without her permission. Even her own do not interfere with what she is doing, even if it is just thinking. I want to know what she is thinking about. Why she is always alone.

Blackleaf disappeared amidst the night shadows and rubble, slowly padding over and around bits of it and out of sight. Rye took deep breaths in an attempt to slow her heartbeat. She finally managed to pull her eyes away from Blackleaf's direction.

That is the closest I have ever been to her. And her scentless trait really holds up to my herald's description; I could not get a hint of her from where I was... but I wish I had. She must have a scent if you smell her fur directly. Sometimes, I wish we were not of different sects. I want so bad to speak alone with her. She, bound by oath, and I, bound by birth, have the same goal in mind. But being born to the Shadows puts her at risk for the blackcough infection, and she is the only medicine cat with no resistance to it. And I do not want to put her in danger.

Rye's claws emerged, slowly tapping against the wall.

It is moments like this where I wish I could directly control my powers. Fortunately, as an Incarnate, I do control the next best thing. And I am about to use them to help put an end to this absentee nightmare.

Chapter 10

"Great, now swipe up the next few times."

The she-kit leapt into the air. She slashed her claws upward and hit the snow pile hard. She sprung up just as quickly as she went down.

"Your target, it is attacking!" a tom's voice shouted.

She darted between several piles. Her direction and distance kept changing while she took shots at the bases.

"Now finish them!"

Placing herself between the four of them, she leapt into the air. With one front and hind leg on the ground, she swiped the piles with the remaining two. She quickly switched legs and hit the other two. The she-kit jumped away and landed near the other cat.

"Wonderful form," the tom said, shaking his white and black fur. "Why, that is some of the best fighting that I have ever seen in this branch. You executed the four-kill without flaw!"

"Thanks to you teaching me," the she-cat responded.

The tom bowed. "You humble me, my Prophet."

"Are you ever going to call me 'Rye' again?" she asked.

"But my Prophet, your powers have been working since your birth. Even a herald is no longer worthy to speak your name."

Rye stared along the river. "Walk with me, Kritz."

The older tom eagerly rushed to her side. She slowed her pace, looking at every step she took. Even with the sun dulled by the clouds, it was easy to spot her paw amidst the frigid rocks. Rye stopped, nearly missing how well the creature was blended into the dirt. But its mostly pink tail and nose were not. The rat's eyes stared

blankly into the snow that had piled near the twoleg nests. Its fur did not move amidst the slight breeze. She walked up to it.

"What is it, my Prophet?" Kritz stopped just a tail-length away from her. "Is something buried underneath?"

Rye tapped the rat; no movement.

Kritz's eyes were wide upon seeing it. "Dead or not, that was an amazing find. I never noticed it. It is unfortunate that it has already frozen to death."

"I would account that to your age rather than my vision," Rye said. "But it does no use to us."

She tilted her head to see the other side. Most of its fur was missing, and two big scars covered the center of the bald spot on its back. The rat had lost part of its tail on closer inspection, and its paw pads were cut to scarring. Its belly fur was shaved close from dragging itself around. One of its ears had been sheared off, its face appearing frozen in the moment of terror from its attack. Its eye twitched. Rye took a step back, freezing and glancing behind her. Kritz was inspecting the area. She did, as well. The half-frozen river flowed far out of her vision, with the twoleg nests showing less damage the further down she managed to look. The water gurgling below the ice did nothing to drown out the cawing of distant crows and the hiss of even more distant sky-monsters. Rye turned her head to the sky; even the wind was difficult to hear.

"Kritz," she said, "give me a summary of the day's events."

He sat. "You awoke just after sunrise. You ate two freshly caught mice and addressed the branch with your presence and led our prayer. You then wanted to train, the fifth day in a row you have done so. I believe you have mastered all the moves you have practiced today. This marks the ninth time in a row you have awaken during the day rather than the night. But last night you hardly slept."

The kit sighed. "And in the past moon, how much time have I spent dealing with the clans or with StarClan?"

Kritz looked away for a moment. "Omitting your power's effect on the Clan of False Shadows, you spent no additional time dealing with them aside from listening to our spies' reports. As for StarClan, you have prayed in solitude every other day or night in the past moon, as usual."

"It is not enough. I have prayed, trained, observed the clans. But it is not enough to justify what I have failed to do. And to end it in total annihilation, I believe, would only further separate us from the Stars." Her eyes returned to the ground briefly, staring at the damp soil between her paws. She looked at him. "Kritz, how long do you believe I have left to live?"

He shook his head. "My Prophet, you are but four moons old! You are nowhere near the end of your natural life... is something wrong? Do you feel ill? Shall I have you examined?"

"Do not worry, I am well. It was just... just something I have given much thought, lately." She smacked the rat into the river, between a crack in the ice blocks.

"You should not worry yourself with such thoughts, my Prophet," Kritz said. "Incarnates of Rye have historically lived as long as kittypets, even without all their special twoleg medicine."

"On the contrary, I should worry about such things. Most of the Incarnates had powers that revolved around death in one way or another... mine to an extreme, I suppose."

Kritz waited again for her to take a generous lead before following. "If that is what you are worried about, I assure that you are immune to your own power. We had that taken care of when we first discovered what you could do. And you have yet to directly infect any Covenant members. Refraining from direct contact with the Shadows should prevent the possibility."

"Unfortunately, it is my own death I fear for," she said. "Right now, the only thing stopping the Clan of False Shadows from invading is UnderClan."

"My Prophet, if I may speak freely, I believe they are more afraid of

what will happen to them if they invade Covenant territory than they are of UnderClan. They are superstitious, straying further from the Stars with each passing moon. Eventually, they will realize they are being judged, and it will be too late."

Rye slowly padded towards the riverbank. "Perhaps they only think that way with my birth. I have not been alive long enough to have a firsthand account of what Shadow leadership is thinking, Especially in regards to StarClan's silence. Last night, I encountered Blackleaf, perhaps as close as I will ever get in safety. The look she had all over, she no longer cares for this war. Her allies fight for reasons they might not remember or have stopped caring about. But her... all she cares about is StarClan. I believe that is what she thinks about when she is alone, and what will happen if she does not return their word to her clan. Perhaps I share a thought, the idea that if the savagery between these two clans is not stopped, we will all become but a footnote in history. An incidental repeat of the Axin Mess. And the Star Covenant will see that even an Incarnate of Rye is not enough to end the silence."

"That is a dark thought, my Prophet," Kritz said. "All recognized nearby branches know of your presence. But your power is effective. Even without their direct word, StarClan has blessed us with a victory. And we shall defend you with our lives until that happens, and forever beyond."

The water's edge was recessed at least a tail-length away by gray-stone, shaped by the twolegs. She had too arch her head down to see the small patters between the stones. A hiss further down seized her attention. A pair of kits were hitting each other briefly until one pushed the other aside to dip their paws in the water first. A third hit both of them from behind, saying something inaudible and made both clean their paws at the same time. Upon spotting her, the pair was shuffled away behind a nearby pile of snow.

"Shadow kits," Kritz said. "Not much younger than you and not even a shred of the maturity."

"Be honest with me, herald," Rye said. "If the clan war descended to total anarchy, what are the odds you can protect me from being killed? Honesty."

He kept his mouth shut for a while, tapping his paw against the snow. "Our warrior-rah are more elite fighters than even the clan's senior warriors. After your birth, we sent word out to neighboring branches as protocol dictates, but we do not yet have their numbers. The ones that have arrived tell us twoleg infrastructure is still in shambles after the Great Sky War. I fear we will not see reinforcements before your power does severe harm to the Shadows, which would make them desperate... If they were to raid tonight, they could eliminate our branch with ease. Of course, that leaves them open to UnderClan. Incidentally, the result is the same with UnderClan, should they find some underground route to our enclave. Assuming, for some reason, Heidi's pack decides to engage, the result is the same. No amount of anti-canid training will stop a whole pack of veteran war dogs."

The cats from hiding emerged further away from the bank; the senior of the three looking straight at her before disappearing behind a twoleg nest.

"What if I told you I had an idea to end the war between the clans early?"

Kritz purred. "It is a grim thought, that we may have to defend you in vain if either clan attacks us. If you have thought of a way to amplify your power..."

Rye began circling the tom. "Right now, only the Shadows have sick cats. We witnessed the first from UnderClan to be infected, but she is a prisoner of war. Clementstar called the truce in the first place. Something, to him, is more important than the risk of blackcough or giving time for the Clan of False Shadows to recover. If I convince him to fight harder for his allies, it could mean spreading the infection to their own ranks. Though StarClan has not made them targets, UnderClan's weakening would balance out power, assuming the Shadows take no preemptive action. Which, thanks to *her*, I am certain they will not."

Tail dropping, Kritz's eyes widened as he stopped in front of her. "My Prophet, w-we have tried negotiating with UnderClan and the Shadows, before *and* after you were born. Neither acknowledge Covenant branches, and neither will hear us anymore."

"That is why I will be doing all the talking. You have told me once before Clementstar is soft. Solestar would have me executed without an audience, but he would not. I would expect to be taken hostage, but if I go alone, the threat his allies see me for may be put at ease.

"My Prophet!" Kritz's tail shot up. "These clans hold many moons of hatred. You are far too young to be a sole diplomat to either of—"

"Did you just doubt an Incarnate because I am still a kit!? Have I not been reasonable throughout my short life? Have I not begun the condemnation of one of those clans?"

The old tom clamped his mouth and dropped to his belly, eyes fixed on his paws. "I apologize for that blasphemy, my Prophet."

Rye sighed, staring at the distant bridge behind her. It was obscured by a thin layer of snow that hid much of the detail. She was too far to spot any of the warriors she knew were on its ledges.

"You speak wisdom, not blasphemy. The warrior-rah would have never dared question my idea. But the only way I can be taken seriously by UnderClan is to appear before them alone. An entourage will only make them reject us again. It has to be just Clementstar and I to ease his allies' fear. Make me appear less than what I am. This is a risk I am willing to take towards the Final Victory of the Covenant, as all Incarnates strive for. You understand this?"

"Of-Of course I do, my Prophet," he said.

Rye ran her paw through his thick fur. "Rise, herald. I need your assistance to carry this out. I have thought about such an action for a quarter-moon now. And, as you said, further hostilities or sudden desperation from either clan could end in ruin for us. I do not have time to wait for my body to catch up to my ambitions. And it would be a disservice to the entire Star Covenant if this branch and I were wiped out because I waited too long for my powers to bring about salvation... I *will* carry this out. Will you help me?"

"Always," he said. "As long as there are stripes on my body you will

have my full support."

"Wonderful," Rye purred, glancing at where the frozen rat once lay. She could not even find the marks from where she hit it from its resting place. "Walk with me, Kritz."

Again, he eagerly padded to her side, staying just a head's length behind her. She turned around and walked back the way she initially came, putting the bridge behind her. Snow began to fall and the wind had ceased. Their path was littered with small leftovers from the destroyed twoleg nests. Rye tried shaking the mud from her paws, the brown clashing against her white fur.

"I shall see to it you are groomed upon returning to camp," Kritz said. "Afterwards, we can discuss the details of this plan with the elite warrior-rah. I am sure they will be delighted to hear of your preemptive ambition... No matter what, of course, the Clan of False Shadows must not know where you are."

"Of course," Rye said. "That would only encourage hasty action from Solestar. I will leave it upon you to keep our routines and patterns up as if I were still here. With the showing of myself close to the bridge yesterday, they may be trying to keep a closer eye on my whereabouts. But I cannot bind Clementstar to secrecy."

"I am certain you will find a way, my Prophet." Kritz straightened his tail, holding his head high.

She glanced across the river, into UnderClan territory. Much of it was barely visible over the piles of snow they made. She looked for any signs of patrols behind them, but they left none. No markings, no prints, and no forms moving about. The fur on the back of her neck shuttered.

Chapter 11

"Have you felt your questions have been answered to the best of my abilities?"

Amidst the dimly lit twoleg den, several raised their paws. They were arranged in a semi-circle around Rye, all lying down under the moonlight from the holes in the roof. Patches of snow covered the floor wherever they did not sit.

"And you approve of my future actions without protest or distrust?"

Her white fur glistened from the reflections given off by several mirrors on the far walls. There were no holes over where she sat, and the floor she stood on was cleaner than the rest of the den. She glided her eyes across the group. All kept their paws up, silent. She lingered on Kritz. But the rest of their faces seemed to blend in on each other. Rye's ears dropped a little. Her chest thumped a bit faster as she looked upon them, all watching her.

"Very well," she whispered. "I will prepare to leave immediately. The task of keeping my exploits and true location a secret will fall to my herald. The elites will be in charge of selecting warrior-rah to rendezvous with the incoming reinforcements. Mark those you choose with our holy symbol to prove the order comes from a living Incarnate."

"Understood, my Prophet," they said in unison. They quickly scattered from the moonlight; Kritz remained and approached.

"It is your first time giving an order of this scale," he whispered. "And it is customary for a herald to ask the Incarnate if she would like anything carried out in absolute secrecy, unjudged and unquestioned."

"For now, my orders as is will do," Rye said.

"Very well." The old tom cleared his throat. "You may put all of your focus to this task. The branch will carry on as if nothing of interest is happening." He darted away, leaving her alone in the den.

She walked towards the light beaming from the holes in the roof and looked up. Just over half the moon was visible amidst the clear sky. Looking directly left from it, a group of thin clouds was beginning to move in its path. She closed her eyes.

"I see your faces every day, every night," she whispered, "yet I have no idea who any of you are. We share a religion, a family, a mark, but you treat me like a god. And I... what am I supposed to act like? They are strangers to me. One of these nights, I will ask Kritz about why I see them so. But for now, the medicine cat of a foreign clan is more familiar to me than my own."

She padded towards an opening in the nest. Looking from it first, she saw no others in the area. Scenting the air, she caught nothing but the remnants of those she had just dismissed.

"One of these nights, I will know. But tonight, I have a mission. I should review the route first before I go."

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The wispy clouds had brought snow and wind. It was nearly enough to keep the she-kit off her paws. Walking along the edge of the twoleg nests helped keep her balanced. The clouds showed no signs of breaking; the moon was completely hidden. The snow fell at a tilt, hard against Rye's face each time she glanced in its direction. Every time she did, she checked the area for patrolling cats on either side of the river. She was unable to see UnderClan's side. Each time she inspected an area, she shook the snow off to keep it from piling. When she looked forward, her path opened up more and became clear. Her heartbeat stayed fast, as did her paws.

Once I get to that monster path, Rye thought, *I cross into the backlands of the Clan of False Shadows. Kritz says the east half bordering the river is usually unpatrolled, I have to watch for the lone sentries that may be taking shelter in the nests.*

Rye stared at each of the openings in the twoleg nests for several seconds, stopping in front of the thunderpath that intersected the one she walked aside. It was covered in wide holes filled with snow; she inspected each of those, too. The lights that lined the path were destroyed. Only what ambience from the moon that managed to reflect through the clouds lit the way. There were a few piles of rubble in the way. She mapped out a path for herself to a structure on the other side, ending next to a crumbled nest that had a hole in its rubble piles small enough for her. She nodded, poking her head from the wall and looking further down the thunderpath she would cross, yanking it back.

One. Definitely a Shadow. Curse their erratic patrol paths. But it does not appear to be patrolling?

She dared to poke her head out. It was a tree-length away from her in the center of the thunderpath. Its only signs of life were the occasional tail or head movements. Rye kept her eyes on it until better light. It had all brown fur. It turned sideways to stretch; she dipped into the snow, shivering with the wind at the side of her head. One of its front legs looked far narrower than the others.

I see her backside; she-cat. And fur loss is not a symptom of blackcough. Battle injuries rarely lead to it, either... an Axin Mess survivor? Here?

When she was done stretching, she sat with her back turned to Rye's direction, unphased by the snow pelting her side. Preparing to cross the monster path, Rye kept herself as low as she could. She crept out from the side of the nest and behind a small pile of snow. She never took her eyes off the lone cat.

It is almost as if she is thinking rather than watching for movement. A younger warrior or apprentice patrolling this area would have walked over here a while ago. But she is using her time alone. I wonder what she is thinking about. Kritz tells me many of the Axin Mess survivors cannot get the images of horror out of their heads. All of that fire, blood, and

fighting. It must have been hard on them. Hard on that poor cat. Maybe her bald patch is the result of a burn, like many of the others. Even if I am to expect her to die earlier than most, I hope she is okay. Clan or Covenant, no cat deserves such scars. And yet...

Rye's thoughts faltered while shaking the effects of a gust that blew her over. She struggled back to her paws and eyed the she-cat again. Her ears twitched, but she did not turn around. Rye took a deep breath and continued across the path.

Her thoughts could be locked to her allies. Not the Shadows, but her real allies. Her family. The other Axin Mess survivors, separated by a half-frozen river and a deep hatred for what is on the other side. It is her adopted hatred, no. Perhaps the Axin Mess has left you disheartened with another war. That is understandable, yes. You use your time alone to reflect on what happened to you. Maybe you are seeking answers, just like me. Even damaged, physically and mentally, you continue to serve a foreign clan. I was told some of the Axin Mess survivors are former kittypets and rogues lured by the infamous Littlestar's promise of food and safety from the wildcat clan harassing them. I wish I could hear what you think of that promise now, she-cat. Where your true purpose lies now.

The snow too thick to crawl through, Rye stood. She froze, staring at the lone she-cat, waiting for her to move. But she kept her head opposite of her position. Glancing forward, she was almost to the other side, no more piles to cover her from view. Rye let her ears flatten, her heartbeat rising.

What motivates you to do this to yourself, she-cat? I thought you would want nothing more than to be reunited with your allies. But instead you patrol for an ill-adopted clan in some remote part of their territory. Is your family not your first priority? Did you just... did you just give up on them? Accepting you would only see them again in StarClan, should they ever speak with clans again... We are opposites, perhaps. Your damage makes you a ghost amidst your surroundings. Your purpose was buried in hamburg, along with many of your allies. And, though it should not, it saddens me to even think what you live for now—

The cat aimed its muzzle to the sky. She turned her head towards the wind, staring in Rye's direction. The kit barely caught glimpse

of her orange eyes before darting to the nest on the opposite end of the thunderpath. She dared peek her head again. The she-cat was approaching her direction, quickening with each paw step. Her heart racing, Rye dashed from the structure and fought the wind with each leap through the air. It was pounding her right, demanding all her effort to stay upright. Eventually, it forced her to stop. She buried herself again, glancing back. The she-cat was standing where she had crossed.

Wind changed directions... she caught onto my scent so quick!

She forced her way into the middle of the thunderpath that bordered the river once more. What was left of the shelter provided by the twoleg nests was gone. It was replaced with the nipping bits of snow and the soft sting of the cold enclosing her paws. Each step began to hurt a little, but she dared not slow her pace.

Do not let idle speculation get the better of you. You must remain alert—

Her paw slammed against something buried. Rye clamped her muzzle shut and stopped to let it throb and subside. She scraped against it again with her rear paw, claws scratching against the density beneath. She delicately set it back into the snow. One step forward and it went right through. Rye pushed her weight onto her other paw, but she had already leaned too far forward. She cried out before falling straight down.

Chapter 12

Her leg finally slowed its pounding. She lay for a few moments to let herself calm down. The small beams of moonlight had disappeared, as did the wind, replaced by harsh yellow dots and sharp whistles. The numbness in her paws disappeared as the warm air took the frigid snow from her fur. She looked up while picking herself off the floor.

Blessed be the Stars I survived that fall?

A tree-length silvertube ran all the way to the hole she fell through, the fast pellets of snow darting across her vision through the small circle. She had to squint to tell what it even was. When she did, she saw her assailant.

One of those silver discs the twolegs use to cover the holes they dig to let them access their tunnels. This is where Kritz said I could enter from. And what he said to be careful for in this weather... I hope I did not scream when falling. UnderClan cats would have heard it.

Rye rubbed her shoulder with her paw and ran her tail across the right side of her body. She moved it across part of her back and felt a small lump from where she landed first. She winced a bit, but kept up her examination. She took a few deep breaths, holding when her ears stopped ringing enough for her to hear herself.

I cannot fail here. I am thankful the Stars decided not to take me with this.

Shaking off the snow, she stretched to try and relieve the pain. Rye focused on the tunnel ahead, her only unblocked path. Her nose was finally hit with the staleness of the air, holding the scent of everything that lived and died in the tunnel. The squeak of rats scurrying around in the dark echoed, the tunnel's lights stretching further than she could see. The red-stone walls took on several

shades of brown, whittled smooth in some areas to the point of obscurity. Her pace was slowed by her aching shoulder, and she checked for blood when she was under one of the lights. Her fur clear of snow, she took in the warmth as she continued further. She scented the air, but the mildew overpowered everything. Her paws were dripping with warm water that trickled ahead and took an abrupt right. She nodded.

Rye took the right, and the ground began to vibrate. It was slight, but enough to make her jump. She hissed a bit as the light down the new tunnel was flickering and dim. She could hear rumbling above her head, cracking and churning. The tunnel quickly closed in the further she got, no longer big enough for a twoleg to walk through. The smell of it grew more potent, curling her nose. Her steps were slower, nearly stopping each time she swore she saw flakes of the wall above her fall. Rye's fur stood on end when a water droplet fell on her back. The walls appeared to be getting smaller; she flicked her tail around and hit both sides to make sure. Shaking, she closed her eyes and took more breaths.

You have nothing to be scared of, Rye. If these tunnels were that unstable, they would have collapsed by now. Twoleg structures do not just collapse. You will live. You will find UnderClan... If I really am underneath the river, I should just keep going forward and left until I stop hearing it. Then I find a way to emerge far from its bank above ground.

Her heartbeat was quick; she tried in vain to calm it. She ran her tail across her spine, feeling the moisture left over from the snow. Her paws were drenched in the ankle-deep water that trickled down the tunnel. She reached another twoleg light and looked down to inspect it. The water was full of small strands that wiggled with the flow of it. She could see the end, but also two shadows flickering in the light in front of her. She scrambled backwards, her claws scraping echoed down both directions.

"You won't be able to escape."

The voice came from in front of her. Rye's ears swiveled behind her as it pinged off the wall.

It is over already? Have they surrounded me? I did not plan to be taken into custody this early.

"You need to come with us."

The voice was accompanied by a growl. Rye let herself lay in the water, stretching her paws out in front of her and sticking her tail straight up. It slapped against the top of the tunnel and bent sideways. Glancing behind her, she saw another cat approach.

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She was flanked by two large cats, each barely making a sound. She could not hear the third following behind, but she knew it was there. Their fur was covered in mud and smelled exactly like the tunnels. The staleness was absent; the gurgling sound from overhead had stopped, replaced by several lines of silvertubes covering holes in the ceiling. The moon was out again, the torrent of snow gone. The area had widened up and cooled down, but was still comfortable. The rocks lining the wall were still circular cut, dribbling water from every crevice in it down to the floor. They made her walk through it while they stayed relatively dry. She tried scenting the air, but it was still impossible to know how many surrounded her, and from what angles.

Two emerged from the dark ahead of her, simply nodding before striding past. They were careful not to touch her fur. Rye caught a glimpse; their own was soaked and their eyes were fresh. They ran directly down the tunnel she had come from.

They must be going to check where I entered from, Rye thought. *There is no way it can serve as entrance for a Shadow invasion, though. Unless they knew of a nearby way out. And are desperate enough to risk such a fall.*

One of the escorts moved right in front of Rye, blocking most of her view ahead and picking up their pace to a trot.

I guess she does not know there are others besides underground-dwelling clans taught to navigate with limited vision. Though there may be landmarks ahead she is trying to obscure from me. Not that I would be able to memorize anything useful. It would take many moons in tunnels like these to learn to navigate them well. I could hardly find my way back right now... I imagine they know who I am just from the eyes. They may be superstitious of my powers, so they only leave a pair to escort me around. If I was an UnderClan cat, I would barely be an apprentice at my age. So maybe they also think I could not escape if I tried. Certainly not by smell or speed.

They turned her around a poorly-lit corner. The water no longer ran beneath her paws, the sound turning to an echo as they rushed further down a wider tunnel. Warmth filled the area; Rye looked around for a source. Three silvertubes replaced the overhead vents and went as far down as she could see. The faint vibrations of them tapping against the gray-stone they hung from hardly drowned out the sound of her claws. One of them was leaking; a tom was standing under the leak and letting the water fall into his mouth. He did not look down to watch the trio pass by.

I am almost certainly being taken to Clementstar, or some senior member. I need a plan. I know UnderClan is reclusive, holding policies of secrecy and dividing the knowledge of their patrol routes. Their ranks never seem to surface unless absolutely necessary, or for patrols. Their senior members are unknown to us. And their territory is impossible to scout due to it being underground and separated from us by a river. But I guess the Shadows found attempting it useful enough, should they negotiate their allies back.

The tunnel showed no signs of veering off in any direction. Rye's escorts finally slowed their pace as a breeze picked up. The mildewed smells returned, along with wet fake-fur and a slight hint of smoke.

Kritz has no idea what the ranking members of the clan looked like. I believe Solestar is the last living cat who knows what he looks like. He is a former kittypet from a distant twolegplace and... that is it. The only hard detail we know about him is his paranoia, given the fact that senior leadership is unknown. If we can even call it that. A realistic assumption, yes, but maybe he is just careful not to give away

information. Hiding any way of estimating numbers has kept large Shadow attacks at bay for as long as their war has continued. Clementstar could just be intelligent, knowing how to use the inferior side of the river to his advantage. If that is the case, I will appeal to it. Alert him on how much more useful the nine he has lost are to him than the two he has captured... but he has to already know this.

The warrior in front stopped; Rye smacked into her and scrambled to her paws. She jumped away as quickly as she got hit. She kept a bit ahead then on out.

Rye was twitching her nose. *They certainly keep to themselves. But all this time around running water fresh from the river, snowmelt, and twoleg stuff has kept their coats cleaner than most. I barely caught hint of anything from her. Perhaps Clementstar demands strict cleanliness standards from his subordinates. If so, it would make him an orderly leader, obsessed with cleanliness at every detail. He has to contend with the idea of leaving his allies to a hostile clan to avoid the possibility of spreading the blackcough... this is an absurd line of thought. He knows of my powers and would not be a shallow creature of hygiene if he was willing to push a temporary truce with a sworn enemy.*

The warriors guarding her stopped, Rye making sure to stop abruptly. She looked down the way she came, unable to tell how far they moved her. The hissing of the silvertubes overhead was a bit louder; she could not hear the ones moving behind her. She took the extra room to stretch her legs.

They really do not seem to think of me as a threat. And I am not here to be one. Good start for now. If I were a captive of the Shadows, I would have several more warriors around me, and one of them would have my tail in its mouth, just in case. Perhaps it is a hint to how he wants his subordinates to act: fearless. A dog pack lives on his territory, and he has not evicted or attacked them. He must have some knowledge on how to project himself and his subordinates. He did not start the war between the two clans, so he does not want to appear like a product of it. He fights a warm but maintains pre-war standards and practices of living to instill level-headed thought within the clan. He must act like this himself.

A lone form appeared amidst the darkness ahead of her, orange eyes piercing through. Rye noticed the faint light near her was

white; she shook and groomed her fur best she could. The warriors glanced at each other before standing at attention.

Perhaps, if he truly does put forth such a stoic attitude, he harbors some kind of fear... his fear of what is to come? No. His fear of... fear of losing his purpose to his comrades? Maybe. He leads survivors of the Axin Mess and Great Sky War, events before his time, and manages to keep himself and his numbers hidden and composed. All while following the warrior code. Or convincing those who have seen so much hardship to continue doing so. He has no birth loyalty to UnderClan, no religious upbringing, used to live the life of an offender, and yet he continues with such efficiency. The only thing that seems out of his control is the raucous patrols on the bridge.

The figure stepped into the light, appearing no older than one of her own allies. Rye glanced over every detail of the tom she could find. A slight limp kept his movements slow. The fur on his legs was shorter than that of his face and body. His tail was even with his back rather than strait up.

This war will end by my hand, my own way. I told every one of the Covenant's elite that I would find a way. I told Kritz to help me end this war faster, to return to the task at hand: StarClan. And her... For Clementstar, I am here to help and harm. He may lose allies during this exchange, but he will gain something much greater.

The tom yawned, attempting to stretch as he walked closer. His rounded face was almost entirely black, while the rest of his fur was a light tan almost mistaken for the mud that covered it. His paws shared this trait; around one of them was a tightly-bound twoleg trinket. Its once white fake-fur was nearly brown, and it was bound high enough from his paw to let him move properly. Hanging down from it was a small, shining charm depicting a twoleg bound to a cross.

Rye took a deep breath.

Watch over me, StarClan. Your will be done, this must go over well.

She extended her chest and stuck her tail in the air. The older cat stopped.

"You must be Clementstar," Rye said.

The tom nodded.

"Do you know who I am, Clementstar?" she said. "Do you recognize my eyes?"

The warriors standing behind her growled, but he calmed them.

"Until today, we never knew if you were a myth or not." His voice was deep, and its monotone reassured Rye.

"Well, it is true," she said. "I am an Incarnate of Rye. My eyes and fur make no mistake of that. And I have decided that aiding you is in StarClan's vision for an end to this war. I have no entourage to defend me and swear on all my prior lives that my powers will not harm you or your allies. All I ask is that you hear me out."

Clementstar yawned again, licking his front paw clean of mud. He flicked his tail through the air several times and stretched his front and hind paws. Rye caught glimpse of a bald patch just below his chest.

"Well?" she said.

He whisked his tail back and forth, eyes already looking behind him.

"Leave her in the fields. See what the dogs make of her."

The warrior behind her clamped down on Rye's tail and started pulling.

"What!?" she said. "But, but I came here to *help* you. I am not a threat like this!"

Clementstar was already walking back the way he came, yawning. Rye was only able to watch him go as she tried to resist the pull of her captors.

"Clementstar!" she yelled. "I am trying to help you retrieve your allies. I did not come all this way to be thrown to a pack of dogs.

Hey! Are you even listening?"

One of the warriors smacked her muzzle, hissing and pushing Rye the opposite direction of their leader. He had practically vanished amidst the tunnel's darkness.

"Get back here!" Rye screamed. "I will not fail here. Not here!"

Chapter 13

She stopped in front of a large hole in the ground, fighting her desire to run after the ones who left her there. The wind was no longer as harsh as it was on her journey, so the snow that covered the once-grassy field was still. Her legs shivered at her wet paws being buried in it. Not one standing twoleg nest could be found, giving her view of the hundreds of distant once. There was a single light flickering occasionally on a silvertube. The orange glow was so dim she could not even see what emerged from the hole. A pungent smell wafted from it; she could taste the dead flesh it carried. It was followed by two growls that shook the she-kit to her tail.

Kill?

One of the dogs stepped forward, its long, black snout revealing its rows of jagged teeth. It bore its massive chest upwards and let out a vicious howl, standing many times her height. It shook its brown fur clear of snow. The second was further from the light, creeping behind her in the darkness.

Pack, kill... kill!

"I am *not* going down like this!"

Rye swiped the dog's muzzle. It whined and shook, but slashed the snow in front of it. Rye was tossed into a deeper part. The dog pounced, but she dug herself in deeper. Pushing herself right underneath it, she raked its rear legs. It barked; the ringing deafened the she-kit. She shook it off and jumped from under it, biting as hard as she could on its tail. Before the dog could turn around, she let go and buried herself in the snow once more.

Kill, kill, kill!

The creature yowled and stamped its enormous paw into the deep

snow. Rye popped out in front of it. She jumped on two paws and slashed in front and behind her, catching claws on both. The other dog whimpered.

The one in front reared up; Rye sprinted underneath it and towards the side of the hole. But it pounced and caught her under its paws. Rye lifted her leg before the dog could press down and slammed it into its muzzle. It fell over whining and swiping at its own nose.

She jumped onto the nearest leg she saw and bit down as hard as she could. The dog growled and wined, shaking her loose before smacking her through the air and against the one nursing itself.

Hot breath and sharp teeth enveloped her and lifted her to eye level of the others. She helplessly flailed around and tore some whiskers from her opponent.

"Woah, woah, enough!" a voice growled. "You're done, she-kit."

"This was a stupid idea, Juta," a lighter one whimpered. "Now my nose hurts."

"Yeah? Maybe you should've fought instead of played."

The two dogs quickly moved into her line of sight. They were rubbing various parts of their snouts. The third still had her in its jaws. Rye froze when she realized she was still alive.

"What!?" she said.

"Hey, I heard some wolf-speak in that 'what'. This one knows wolf-speak!" One of them turned towards a few lone twoleg nests. "Thank you, Clement!"

The other growled. "Don't get too attached. Clement forced an important one on us this time. I know the four-kill when I see it."

"You don't know if she's *that* one. They say one of her eyes is green. You can't see green."

"None of us can see green, idiot. But that move is exclusively Star Covenant. Now let's go. It's up to Heidi to decide what to do with

her."

The two moved towards a distant light Rye could barely see. The third followed, still clamping her in its jaws and moving its tongue across her back. She could no longer scent anything.

"I demand to know where we are going," Rye yelled. "Answer me, you floppy-eared mutt!"

"Ooh," one of them whispered. "Hear that, Dona? She called you a mutt. Bite her ear off."

"No, she called Wolfgang a mutt," the other said. "He's the one with floppy ears."

Rye felt her whole body vibrate as the jaws she was in began to growl.

"Sorry, *king* Wolfgang." One of the dogs bowed towards the one carrying Rye.

"Let's just get to Heidi already. I'm sure you'll be yapping everyone's ear off while we're eating."

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A bright light hanging above the entrance revealed the two. One of them was placing assorted dead animals against a silvertube that ran her height across a twoleg nest. They came from stuffed bags attached to each side of the vest that covered most of her body. The dog's sharp muzzle was black and partly stained red. The rest of its fur was a mix of brown and black, just as the others she was attacked by. Every time Rye found a detail, her eyes would go back to the long scars mostly hidden by the vest and even the way she stood. The second was making sure each kill was draped firmly over the silvertube, lacking many of the visible injuries of the other. Her ears swiveled around at the trio's approach.

"Haaail Heidi!" One of them ran up to the pair, tongue flopping about. "He gave us one that knows wolf-speak. And it's a kitten."

The dog carrying Rye spat her onto the thunderpath. Rye tried to collect herself, but kept shaking amidst the presence of all of them and the sudden shock of cold from warm. She shook what was left of the snow from her fur, taking in the mystery source of nearby heat.

"Look how her fur gets all poufy," one of them said. "I think it's cute."

Heidi was grabbing the last of her catch from her vest. Rye stared; it wrapped all the way around her body, the light brown fade clashing with her black and brown fur. They were worn out near the shoulders, but the tie on the bottom was still tight. The jagged *SS* on the sides were the only twoleg-speak she dwelled on, along with the 'X' shaped symbol she knew well. She shook her fur again and approached the large canine.

"What are you doing with that fresh-kill?" she said.

"So, Dona was right this time." Her voice was stern, but not as deep as the others. "A kitten who knows wolf-speak. Who would've guessed... I'm warming it up. Our food doesn't have to be frozen just because everything else around here is."

Her belly growled a bit when she saw the assortment of rabbits, pigeons, and mice draped carefully over a silvertube, the source of the warmth.

"I heard that," Heidi said. "You can eat with us once the catch warms up."

"We aren't going to eat her?" one of them said.

"No," Heidi responded.

"But she called Juta a floppy-eared mutt."

"She called Wolfgang that," another said. "You're just the one who never shuts up."

"You're both floppy-eared mutts," Heidi interrupted. "Now gather around the little cat in the light. You look like a pack of hunched-over rabids."

The four moved into the light. Rye saw only one male among them, but all were the same breed, sharing Heidi's build and fur pattern. One of them started rubbing her nose; Heidi narrowed her eyes.

"For God's sake, did a kitten *really* put hits on you?" Heidi said.

"It knows the four-kill," one of them snapped. "And Dona kept playing with it."

"Scaring it was your idea," another whimpered.

Heidi sighed. "Ordinary clan cats don't put hits on war dogs. What's your name, kitten?"

Rye stared into the dog's eyes. "You are speaking to an Incarnate of Rye, the first born to any Star Covenant branch in *berlin*. You should be warned, I hold great power over—"

"You know the master-speak name for this place," Heidi said. "And you managed to put scratches on master-trained war dogs. Even if I can't see your eyes, I believe you are who you say you are."

"Just like that?" One of them stepped forwards. "We can't even see the color of her eyes. That's supposed to be the *only* tell."

Heidi shook her head. "Few cats in either clan are trained to deal with us. None would dare proclaim themselves Covenant. But every one of their warrior-rah are trained against canids. And their prophet is supposed to be about the age of a clan apprentice."

"You're telling me this kit could wipe out a whole clan?"

"Is it so farfetched?" Heidi said. "Wolves used to believe the same things throughout history."

"The damn thing's barely old enough to mate. I mean, *look at her*. Does that look like the face of a killer to you?"

Rye looked herself over, realizing her fur was all puffed out from shaking it. She quickly began brushing herself and rolling around to flatten it.

"Yeah, she has great power, all right," the dog continued. "She'll kill us all with her thoughts and prayers. Maybe while she's at it, the moon will turn our luck around and let us go back to being invisible or seeing properly in the dark."

Heidi closed her vest bags. "Come, at attention. We'll eat when you've been introduced."

The dogs slowly moved into a line, each of them puffing out their chests and perking their ears, all but the lone male.

Heidi pointed at the one on the far right. "Dona, the one whose been talking your ear off. Too much time on a boat with only masters does that."

The next in line was growling. "That's Juta. She's probably the one who decided to 'attack' you. But she's still the queen whenever I'm gone."

Juta barked back, snarling at the she-kit. Heidi moved on. "The floppy-eared one is Wolfgang. He's the only male here, but keeps his place well. He doesn't speak or fight, so don't try either."

The last one flinched as Heidi pointed to her. "Karin is jumpy and doesn't speak much. Love her *all the more for it."* She glared at Dona, who winked back.

Rye's chest finally stopped thumping as she watched the pack break rank and walk towards the row of fresh-kill, Dona's tail wagging. Heidi picked the larger of the two rabbits available. Only after she tore a leg away and swallowed it whole did the others take their picks. After dispersing, only a couple of pigeons were left. She dragged it off the silvertube and to the others. She poked at it for a while; warm as if it were just caught, not a single mark left over from Heidi's attack.

"I thought your warrior code said 'no playing with food' or

something like that," Juta said.

"Only clan cats follow the warrior code," Rye said, "not Covenant branches. And that code is not practiced by ancestor clans, just silverpelt clans. So UnderClan, but not the Clan of False Shadows."

"Cat rules suck." Juta went back to eating her rabbit, letting Wolfgang take occasional bites.

Heidi noticed Rye's paw shaking. "You cold?"

The she-kit looked at her paw. "I am fine... I just have never been near a pack before."

"Most haven't. But, to reiterate, Dona was just being stupid. We don't eat cats."

"But we *could've* eaten her," Dona whimper.

"We would *never* eat a cat." Juta bore her teeth. "Too much fur, too much effort, not enough meat."

"But this one is so muscular for her age. It's like a little snack I could swallow whole."

"Don't be disgusting, Dona. Chew before you swallow."

"But Heidi does it to rabbit legs. Why can't I?"

"Heidi is alpha. And you are just the Dona." Juta tore away a leg from her rabbit.

"With this kitten on my side, I can challenge Heidi and claim the alpha for myself. Then I can eat everything whole!" She slapped Rye on the back, making her gag on the plumage. "Come, attack kitten. Defeat Heidi!"

"Idiot." Juta tossed the rabbit leg at Dona's face. She caught it. "Keep your strength in mind. You trying to kill her?"

"Perhaps next time, little kitten," Dona barked. She returned to her meal.

Rye stared at the dog, acting as if nothing had happened. Her heart was racing, eyes wide and darting between her and her leader. Wolfgang and Karin practically ignored the ordeal. Heidi noticed, sighing and pushing the bones of her meal aside.

"There's no insurrection, kitten," she said. "Dona and Juta are just being themselves."

"It... sounded so serious," Rye said.

"You don't get out of Covenant territory much, do you?" Heidi said.

"This is my first time out of our borders."

"It must be exciting," Karin whispered. "For everything to be new to you."

"Or she could be the real *blödmann* for thinking anything she says is serious," Juta snapped.

"When I mean it, you'll know," Dona whimpered. "I'll be alpha in a snap."

"Your endearment wore off five years ago."

"Hey, that's around the time you guys found me. What a coincidence!"

"Now I have a headache," Heidi growled. "Time for you two to shut up. Let the cat speak."

Rye looked up, having barely eaten any of her pigeon. The clouds finally broke a little, moonlight poking through the holes. The dogs were eagerly looking at her, except Wolfgang. She started tearing more of the feathers away.

"I'm sure you have questions," Heidi said.

"I have just... I imagined encountering the pack would be a bit different than this."

"Under cats say that a lot, whenever one of them has to speak to us.

But that's rare."

"Is not what Dona said a high crime against the pack? Even a joke?" Rye had plucked the bird clean.

"We aren't much of a true pack the way clans know them, at least. She's always making jokes like that."

"Is it because of her service during the Great Sky War?"

Heidi started tapping the carcass of her finished meal. The others tensed up.

"I only know what my herald and warrior-rah know from living through it. They told me clans did terrible things to each other to survive, and Covenant branches could not communicate for the duration. But your pack was off fighting it, yes? For the twolegs?"

"We were trained by them," Juta interrupted. "They told us to go somewhere and we did. That was that."

"But I only know it from a clan's perspective," Rye said. "You five should be the most knowledgeable about the war. Even more so than the Axin Mess survivors. Twoleg monsters rolling and flying, spitting lightning strikes and dropping fire. Black skies and dead forests. I tried not to mention it before, but there are so many scars on all of you. I cannot even tell which of Heidi's are from the twoleg's war and which are from the Shadows—"

Heidi's paw clenched onto the rabbit carcass as she stood and walked away from the group towards the river. Rye flinched when she walked past; she did not even glance at her or the others.

"Heidi, she doesn't know any better," Juta said.

"I'll get her." Karin walked into the darkness towards the river. The others were silent for a while, Rye looking over them. The wind had disappeared, and the clouds gave way for the moon to shine through.

"Kitten," Juta growled, "ask away about the war, but don't mention the scars, and don't mention anything about Solestar. You were just

curious, but don't be curious about *those*. You only get one shot. She might beat you next time you bring it up."

"I should apologize," Rye whispered.

"That'll just make it worse. Pretend like nothing happened when they come back."

Rye nodded, tapping the bird between her front paws. She noticed Dona twitching a bit at the snowflakes dropping from the light above.

"Well don't clam up just because of that," Juta said. "Ask more questions. We're having a *normal* conversation."

Rye looked at her meal. Even with the feathers gone, she could still not find marks where it was killed.

"Looking for something?" Dona said, ears perking up.

"How could a bird be caught so cleanly?" Rye said.

"There's no healer to get us back to speed if we eat something bad. Rats are dirty and, unlike cats, we know what clean is supposed to smell like and how to kill a creature without mauling it to death."

"We really do," Dona said. "Go on, sniff my fur. It's *really* clean."

"Don't sniff her fur, kitten," Juta growled. "She has fleas."

"I *never* get fleas. Juta's lying because she always gets fleas in spring. There's one part of me that can't ever get fleas, just waiting for—"

"The only thing you're going to attract with that nasty mouth of yours is a street mutt," Juta growled. "Isn't that right, Wolfgang?"

He did not even look up.

"He said 'that's right'."

"Damn. Guess I'll have to find a cat or something to do it."

"Dona, we *just* saw Heidi get upset. If she heard that she'd kill you."

Rye's fur stood on end. "That is such a revolting thought."

"Oh, she's said worse," Juta said. "Her mind isn't quite right, if you couldn't already tell. Now shut up before Heidi comes back."

The three went back to finishing their meals. Rye had barely eaten the pigeon and began gulping it down. Juta finished and held a howl towards the night sky; Rye's fur spiked and she flattened her ears. Dona was nodding her head to the eerie monotone. Wolfgang ignored it and continued eating. When she stopped, she noticed Rye half buried under a pile of snow.

"Forgot little cat ears aren't suited for close and loud noises."

"Now who's scaring the kitten?" Dona whimpered.

"I was *always* scaring the kitten," Juta said. "I had to let Clement know we didn't kill her."

Juta swatted the rest of the rabbit away, leaving nothing but wet piles of fur.

"Hey! The bones are good for our bones." Dona leapt onto the discarded meal, mauling and growling at the carcass.

"See, that's why you were assigned to a ship and not an army," Juta said.

Staring off towards the river, Rye saw two forms moving through the darkness of the field towards their spot. Barely scenting or hearing the pair, even without the wind, she tried eating the flesh close to the bone like the others. The scent of blood from their meals came through. she looked at the piles of bones left by the three; just ribs and spine. The skulls and limbs were gone, just fragments from the bits they spit out while grinding them up. And she hardly heard any of it. Juta slapped the ground in front of her.

"Once you're done here, you come back to the den with us and sleep. Then you can tell us how the hell you got across the river and why Clement dumped a so-called god-prophet with us. I'm too tired

to remember anything more about you."

Chapter 14

The boom, even at a distance, echoed over the clearing of leafless trees and snow-covered grass. The sky-monster zipped low over the twolegplace, disappearing as quickly as they caught a glimpse. The breeze kept one side of their coats clear and the other dotted with snowflakes. The kit tried to shake them off to no avail. She tread lightly through the snow as to not bury her legs too deep.

"I thought things were supposed to be quieter today."

Her companion made a quick shake of the snowflakes but flattened her ears. Her large claws echoed taps once they changed from grass to thunderpath. The kit picked up on her faint, uneven breaths.

"What are you scenting for?" the Rye asked.

"Rabbits." The dog shifted her vest when she saw the large hole in the thunderpath far ahead. "See if we can't get another before going back inside."

Heidi stopped and slowly looked over her surroundings. The kit took a deep breath.

"You..." She felt her head grow light when she saw the dog's whiskers twitch. "Well—"

"If you have something to say, say it," Heidi barked. "You're the leader of a clan. Gives your voice merit or something."

"Leader of a branch, technically." Rye paused again, staring at the 'X' symbol on her vest, and the twoleg-speak characters near it. "You seem to really know a lot about twolegs. Last night, the others were using words and phrases I have never heard. Is it... okay to ask about your involvement with them?"

Heidi sighed, sitting to face the kit.

"There's a lot to tell. Especially to a cat. Short version: my

involvement with the masters started the night after I was born. I was moved from a farm to this twolegplace, to a new mother and litter. Their tests started days after."

Rye's ears dropped. "That sounds horrible. How could they do that?"

"That's just how the masters did things. But I barely remember her, anyway... When we were old enough to eat, we'd all be thrown in large pens to play together. A hundred or so per group. That's where I met Karin and Juta."

"Were they in your new litter?" Rye asked. "What about the queens? What do they do about raising puppies that are not their own?"

Heidi shook her head. "You know, I thought you agreed to tell me more about you. Only reason I let you with me on one of the *few* moments I get to myself."

"But you must know a lot about clan life, being in mutual relation with the *hamburg* clans. But to us, all three of our groups, your lives are more myth than fact. Besides, Dona kept making references to things I think she expects me to know."

"Just in case she told you we still practice breeding, we don't. The masters do."

"Hey, she *did* tell me that," Rye said.

"Sometimes she goes overboard with the mating jokes. Amusing, at least. All of us were born from the master's breeding programs... Now I have a question for you, kitten. Why are you here?"

Heidi glanced in front of her, spotting the hole leading below the pavement a tree-length ahead of them. Rye was looking at her paws, trying to keep her claws hidden.

"I cannot tell you," Rye said.

"And why not?"

"Because it is... for reasons that do not concern the dog pack. My true whereabouts must remain unknown."

"The Shadows never saw you leave?" Heidi said. "Must've jumped down a hole or something to pull that off. Any traversable entrance is blocked."

"Something like that... did you tell them?"

Heidi's legs flexed as she growled. "We don't communicate with the Shadows. Ever."

"Unfortunately, I have to assume Clementstar has not told anyone. It could be disastrous for my branch if everyone knew where I was."

"You ended up in UnderClan territory, so you were trying to talk to Clement for some reason. A bit of time and I could probably figure it out."

"What!?" Rye mewed.

"What? Wolves are smarter than cats. And dogs are smarter than wolves. Usually shocks cats who first meet us."

Heidi watched Rye's claws kneed the ground.

"How about a little wager?" Heidi said, leaning close. "You put scratches on Dona and Juta. That's impressive enough for a full-grown warrior. How about you spar with me? Every hit you put on me, I tell you a bit more about us and you get to say less about yourself."

The kit's fur shot up. "There is no way I could beat you in a straight fight."

"No, but it will keep me sane while I talk."

A bark rang out from the hole ahead. When Heidi turned to it, Rye looked over her scars again. She found one that stretched from her left thigh. Walking around to get a better look, she saw a massive, furless pink scar that ran from behind her tail, under her vest, and emerged again near the bottom of her neck.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Heidi said. "I won't force you to tell me what you're here for."

"It is alright," Rye said. "I will do it."

"Curiosity and cats, right?"

"I am afraid I do not understand that reference, either."

"Guess it's just something pets know. Come on. And *don't* mention the sky-monster."

Heidi marched forward, shaking the snow from her before carefully climbing over the lump of it in front of the hole. Rye bounced over, spotting the hole in the ground half the width of the thunderpath. It was clear of snow and immediately washed warm air over her. The pack leader marched down without a second glance. Rye looked at the numerous silvertubes jutting out from the top of the hole. The rubble had been pounded and filled smooth, leading down into a tunnel much wider than the ones she arrived through. The wall's red-stone was still red, and melted snow trickled down the gutters on both sides instead of the middle. When she entered, she saw the hole only went so far before being blocked by a mess of rocks and silvertubes. The other's ears immediately perked up on seeing her enter; Wolfgang's folded in each time the sky-monsters were audible.

"Hey look," Dona barked, "she's good enough to sleep here tonight. Right?"

"Right," Heidi said. "She won't sleep near the heat pipe this time."

"The last few cats Clement threw on us didn't get to do that," Juta growled. "How's she going to earn her keep?"

Heidi walked to the end of the den; Wolfgang slid himself out of the way and against a gutter. "She's going to spar with me in exchange for information."

"How about you make it a real circus?" Juta said. "Loser gets fed to Karin."

Karin shook her head and shrieked further into her corner.

"Aww, she's already having a hard enough time," Dona whimpered.

"But if it's a circus, where's the food?"

Heidi flipped open one of her vest bags and tossed her a mouse.

"The kitten caught it while we were gone."

Dona sniffed it, pulling her nose back and rolling it over.

"Oh no!"

She smacked it across the tunnel and into the opposite wall, rolling down towards Wolfgang; he stretched his tongue out and swallowed it whole.

"It's just got to be perfect for you, doesn't it?" Juta growled.

"It didn't look peaceful," Dona whimpered.

"I threw a severed rabbit leg at you yesterday and you didn't seem to mind."

"But it was already *peaceful*."

Juta shook her head. "I thought the kitten was supposed to tell you about her. I want to know all about that little tree branch she commands."

"Star Covenant branch," Rye snapped.

"I guess she's more curious about us than I am of her," Heidi said. "And she's willing to pay the price I've set for information. Now, unless anyone else wants to add something, I want to get this over with and be done with this kitten's curiosity about the war."

The others did not so much as twitch when Heidi spoke. Rye felt her fur creep up; the air grew heavier around her. The sky-monster hissing far above was distinct, as was the wind blowing against the hole behind her. Dona tensed up. Juta and Karin were at attention. Even as he lay, Wolfgang kept his eyes on the pair.

Rye's claws tapped against the stone. "I, um... do not wish to put you in an uncomfortable—"

She leapt over Heidi's paw as it slashed against the stone; it smacked her on its return when she landed, sending her halfway across the tunnel. Before she could get up, she rolled out of the way of her massive foreleg again. Heidi growled.

"As we grew up, we were removed from the training pens and put into units. I was with Karin and Juta. We went many places, but always with the armored machines. Those things cats know as tigers."

Heidi walked forward; Rye leapt and slid under the and behind the dog. She bit down on Heidi's leg. She growled and kicked, hard. Rye slammed against the tunnel wall, struggling to her paws.

"C-Careful of her, Heidi," Karin whimpered.

"We were in *hamburg* when the enemy started blowing it up," Heidi said, facing the kit. "And we finally started to see our masters were losing the war."

She over-slashed forward. Rye used the chance to jump onto her shoulder and grapple onto her back, hitting her several times. Heidi shook her shoulders free of the kit, who kicked off and landed to the side of her.

"The cat clans of *hamburg* had already destroyed each other by the time the attacks started. Only two remained and they already had bad blood between them. I saw the raids, our dead masters, burning machines and buildings. It was every bit as bad as the Axin Mess survivors said it was – worse, probably, after we left. We went back to where we came from."

Looking over the dog, Rye saw her breathing quicken and her muscles tense. Heidi's eyes were wide for mere moments before bringing them back under control. She lunged her jaw forward. Rye leapt back and smacked her nose several times before darting out of sight. Heidi swiveled around but could not see her. She jumped forward, leaving the kit shocked as she gracefully landed on the snow at the entrance.

"We returned to *berlin*," she continued, "on one of their machines.

The ride was rough, but the destination was worse. The place was under attack from all sides. The masters were alive, though. And they were happy to see us."

Rye darted several different directions to throw off the dog's aim. She leapt onto the vest and dug her claws into its hide. Before Heidi could snatch her up in her jaws, she dragged herself to the dog's back and clamped on. The kit's claws were no match for the thick fur.

"We fought alongside our masters one last time. It was many, many moons of sniffing out enemies and listening for war machines. The sound of all those explosions and weapons nearly left us deaf. We saved each other's lives more times than we can remember. But in the end—"

Heidi barked when the kit's claws finally breached her fur and scratched just above her tail. She dropped herself; Rye rolled just behind her. She flicked her tail and let the kit hit the floor a second time before smacking her with it, dropping her again.

"In the end, it didn't matter. The masters numbered in the thousands of males when we arrived. It ended with the execution of a few of their pups and the last of their soldiers. The war machines clad in green and mud rolled in, waving the symbol that now adorns *berlin*. *Sowjets* they called them. Didn't matter to us. We lost!"

The war dog charged the kit, who ducked away from her swipes. Rye rolled over to Heidi's foreleg and bit down again. She snatched the kit in her jaws, whimpering at her fangs tearing away hair and flesh, and tossed her towards the entrance. Rye missed the snow and hit a rock, letting herself roll back into the den and in front of Heidi.

"I realized something important the day I watched the enemy's symbol waving over ours. To the very end, I still had my friends. No matter how far over my head they were, the masters' goals were my own. They reminded me so much of the stories I would hear when I was a pup. About the great wolf clans of old. I wore their symbol with pride. And even when I was standing in the ruins of my home, of the masters' fallen empire, I was... I was..."

She saw the kit struggle to stand, pressing a paw to her chest and keeping her tail close. Karin had already rushed to her side.

"Happy... I was happy. And that was the last time..."

Heidi looked around the den. Dona had hidden her eyes away. Wolfgang was staring straight at her. Karin had helped Rye to her paws, still clutching her chest.

"I... did I hurt you, kitten?" Heidi said.

"No," Rye mewed. "Nothing feels broken. But it hurts."

"Is there anything else you want to say?" Karin said.

"Of course not!" her leader snarled. "Consider our agreement done, kit. You don't have to tell me anything."

Heidi walked towards the back of the den, Wolfgang sliding himself away from it. Rye pushed herself from Karin, taking deep breaths.

"I came here to help someone."

Heidi turned around and narrowed her eyes.

"At first, I came to end the war between the two clans," Rye said, "but it was never why I really did it. There is someone in the Clan of False Shadows who I greatly admire, and who is in danger from my power. She has a noble goal aligning with mine, I am certain of it."

"And how can you be sure the goal is noble? You couldn't have had a conversation with her."

"No," Rye said. "I can just feel it every time I see—"

"You *feel* it?" Heidi growled. "How long have you been alive? Four moons? Maybe five? How could you possibly *feel* anything like that?"

"Aside from being captured, I am certain this is the path set out for me by the Stars."

"Don't use your religion to justify your confusion. This isn't their path."

"How dare you. The Incarnate is StarClan's vessel. My will is Silverpelt's will, and your blasphemy is just that."

Heidi sat when she reached the furthest inward she could go, laying inside a hole in the rubble.

"Think whatever you want. Since I'm not a believer, you can believe my 'blasphemy' to be nothing."

She stretched out her front paws and closed her eyes. Wolfgang had slid closer to the entrance than the end, Juta and Dona doing the same. Karin walked past the kit before stopping at the growl that made her fur stand on end. Heidi glanced at her with one eye, then closed it. Karin shook her head and started climbing the ramp out the den. Before leaving, she held and ear to the sky. There was nothing, and she was out.

Rye took a few steps forward. "I know what I want."

"And it's not her," Heidi growled. "If you really are an incarnate of another cat, *you* can't 'want' anything more or less than the original."

The war dog crossed her front legs and laid down her head, the furs on the back of her neck flattening. The other dogs looked towards the entrance above, Karin long gone. Juta and Karin stood to leave as well. Wolfgang was already asleep. Rye was left looking at Heidi's rough breathing and shifting about as she tried to get to sleep. She took a deep breath.

Chapter 15

The medicine den was nearly pitch-black. The working twoleg light on its left side prevented that, illuminating the pile of sleeping cats in the opposite corner. The snow that fell through the hole in the ceiling quickly melted and flowed through the channels in the middle of the floor and to the edges of the den. She carefully avoided stepping in the channel, watching three of her comrades drinking from the edges. The gray-stone beneath her pads was unusually tolerable, her steps leaving behind no prints like the others she was careful not to disturb from grooming each other. She gave herself enough space to not hit them with the bags on her dark green vest, either. It was still clean, but her fur had small bits of mud in it. The sagging weight of the bags did not slow her down; she rushed to the opposite side of the den, not pausing to take Fleetheart away from the sleeping pile.

Her goal was the back; the cutout in the wall was just big enough for a twoleg to slip through sideways. As she approached it, she heard the echoes of the wind and the trickle of water through the walls instead of down them. The hole was partially boarded up, but she easily slipped under them. Looking back, she caught the one blue eye of Flyfoot glaring at her. She breathed again when she moved on. Pressing forward, she was alone in a massive gray-stone tunnel, the floor much warmer than the medicine den proper. The only unblocked direction was right, and the only light came from the end of the tunnel. The she-cat approached it, each step leaving behind prints from the water that covered most of the floor. The scent of her comrades just a tree-length away in the other room faded, replaced by the salty bitterness of twoleg mechanisms and her comrade's markings.

Turning the right corner, she saw an even longer tunnel span ahead, wide enough to let rows of monsters roll through. It was well lit by yellow twoleg lights that did not flicker or fade. The walls were slimy from the mud and snow that dripped through the small ventilation holes. Not a hint of moonlight shined through them. She

quieted her steps, having to retract her claws each time she heard their scratches echo. The walls were adorned with entrances covered with sheets of silverwood. All but one; the she-cat focused on the closest one on the right wall. Shifting the weight in her bags again, she could feel their contents seeping through. Rushing to the opening, she slipped into a small den, a warm pocket amidst the mixed gray-stone.

The den's walls started closing in on her before she even got her bearings. Most of it was taken up by silvertubes and red-stone lined up at one side. There was a single light hanging overhead, perfectly still despite the draft. The she-cat set her sights on the bundle of gray fur curled up in the corner. She was sitting on a thick blanket of fake-fur, continuing to groom her extended leg even when her ears twitched at the presence of another. The she-cat opened her bags and rolled to one side, then the other, dumping the melting slush into a deep hole. The water from it quickly overflowed and ran along the edge of the walls, just as in the medicine den.

The older cat stopped grooming and faced her. "My, my, how difficult it must be to keep all white fur clean." Her voice scratched more, and some of the green in her eyes had faded. "You look like you dragged yourself across the banks all day."

She took a few steps closer to the False Shadow, and sat.

The older cat rolled onto her back. "Is this what you wanted last time, Blackleaf?" she growled. "For me to roll over and submit? Well, ask away. There are no silvertubes keeping you from hitting me."

Blackleaf took a deep breath, letting the bristled fur on the back of her neck fall.

"Seems like you're holding back," the False Shadow said. "You aren't nearly as feisty as the last time."

"Something you said when we first met bothered me," Blackleaf said. "I want to clear it up."

"Oh...?" The older she-cat tilted her head to the side to cough into

the blanket, wiping her mouth afterward. "So, when I insulted you, it hurt your feelings? Like it was supposed to?"

"I came here out of good will," Blackleaf hissed. "I want to know why you hate me—"

"I don't *hate* anyone," the she-cat snapped.

"Then why did you keep insulting me? I know you didn't talk to Fleetheart that way."

"Because your attitude is horse-dirt, especially coming from a medicine cat."

"Why do you care so much about how I act?"

"The role is important, Blackleaf. How you act is just as important as what you are."

"I was ready to start off nice. You were already prepared to insult me. And what you said about me making you lose your faith got to me, okay? You win. You're a better cat than me. Now tell me why you hate me!?"

The False Shadow narrowed her eyes. "I don't, hate, anyone."

"Then why do you act like it?" Blackleaf snapped.

The she-cat curled over and coughed into the blanket again, staring at it for a few moments afterward. She shook her head and wiped her muzzle with it; Blackleaf could barely make out the stains it left behind. She rolled off her back and sat up, keeping herself tall and relaxing herself.

"I don't hate you," she said, "and I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. But it sounded like that little admission in the end came from a genuine place. Care to tell me what's wrong?"

"Not to you," Blackleaf said.

"Oh... I really am sorry if I made you feel that way. I didn't come here to make enemies."

"We're already enemies. But why do you care how I feel?"

The False Shadow coughed into the blanket again, dragging it over her shoulders.

"Do you need water?" Blackleaf said.

The she-cat stared at the now still pool of it. She looked at her, then at it. Blackleaf nodded and stepped back until she was just outside the entrance. The False Shadow threw off the blanket and leapt towards it, dunking her head in and lapping it up. Blackleaf peeked in; she saw her dip her head and out, not waiting for her tongue to bring it to her. Once the pool was half gone, she stopped and looked at the medicine cat. Her ears flattened and she sulked back to her place in the corner, letting Blackleaf reenter the den.

"I suppose there is some joy in seeing your enemy grovel over water like that."

Blackleaf looked into the puddle. The water was faintly red. But she kept her ears sharp, even as the False Shadow was avoiding eye contact and keeping her head down.

"But you came here to learn things about me," she continued, brushing her face dry. "I came to your territory to learn as well... I..."

Blackleaf shook her head and leaned as close as she would dare. "I won't tell anyone about what you say here. Not even Solestar. I just want to know why I upset you?"

Again, the False Shadow looked away.

"I-I'll even tell you about the truce," Blackleaf said. "Your comrades are being kept in the same spot, but they won't be starved anymore and no one will hurt them. And we are working on getting at least the apprentices traded for one of ours."

Finally looking at her, the False Shadow sighed and curled her tail. "I'm surprised you care so much about what I think of you."

"I didn't before," Blackleaf said. "But I was mad at something else

when I was thinking about what you said. A few days after that passed, and this is all that's on my mind."

"Well thank you for being honest with me."

"Not going to ask if I'm lying? I am your enemy."

"At this point, I really don't care who my enemies are supposed to be."

Even while the she-cat coughed into the blanket again, Blackleaf's ears perked up. The False Shadow wiped her muzzle and cleared her throat.

"Your attitude upset me because it reminded me of someone. I came here because of my closest friend, my littermate. His faith was in danger, and so was his happiness."

"Then why bring such a large group?" Blackleaf said. "It might've helped you get caught faster."

"Don't get the wrong idea," she snapped. "They were ordered here by Clementstar. You aren't dumb. You know why. Splitting up was the original plan. But for me, it was more than just a scouting mission. And that jeopardized the whole thing."

"You did this for your littermate?"

"I don't take his happiness lightly," the False Shadow said. "He is one of our reclusive medicine cats."

Blackleaf's eyes widened. She quickly darted out the den and peered around the corner, then reentered and sat a bit closer to the older captive.

"Move back," she said. "I'm not trying to give you blackcough."

She did as she was told.

"A medicine cat who doesn't believe in StarClan," Blackleaf said.

"He did," the False Shadow said. "He helped me believe. But during

the Great Sky War, they stopped speaking. And as those around me were left with little food, toxic water, and fire and lightning raining from above, they slowly lost hope in it all. Many lost their lives. My littermate was not among them. He rallied those left to the Stars. When UnderClan was formed after the twoleg's fighting stopped, he did the same thing... but then he fell apart, bit by bit. Just like the others during the war."

The False Shadow dropped her head, stopping to take a breath and cough.

"He just felt... alone. Without the presence of the Stars, he just shut himself away more and more, including from me. Honestly, seeing the same with Shadow medicine cats makes me think I risked my clanmate's lives and mission in vain. But I can't just go back to him with nothing... Nor can I just go back, I guess."

Blackleaf's claws were scratching bits of the floor. She looked at the hole of water, too far away to see over the edge and what remained inside. Keeping her eyes away a while longer, she tried pushing the she-cat's words from her mind.

"Are you still with me?" the False Shadow said.

"Do you still believe?" Blackleaf asked.

She looked away for a moment. "I do..."

"Then let me help you."

"How?"

Blackleaf's ears perked towards the entrance. A faint scratching echoed down the main tunnel, vanishing quickly. She stood alert, lingering until she was sure it was gone.

"I hope it's not by jumping at every little shadow," the she-cat said. "Littlestar tried that. My littermate tried that. I did it. I don't want you to make such a mistake."

"I promise, I'll see what I can do," Blackleaf whispered. "I want the same thing you do."

"I don't suppose that includes letting me go?"

She was halfway leaving the den when she paused, feeling her claws demanding to come out. Blackleaf glanced at them. She sighed, raising her tail and head as she strode out of the den, letting her eyes wander towards every stray sound.

"They call it blackcough," the False Shadow said. "But the coughing isn't so bad. Just a lot of fatigue and thirst."

Blackleaf continued on her way.

Chapter 16

"Watch mouth this time, little one."

Flyfoot was breathing down Blackleaf's neck, pushing ahead and unsetting her medicine vest. She stopped briefly to adjust and growled at the wildcat.

A shadow was waving its tail far ahead of them, a layer of fog shrouding it. The warriors on each ledge of the bridge looked onward at the pair heading to the border line. The closer Blackleaf got to it, the less silhouettes she saw. The morning light was completely obscured behind a thick cloud cover, the snow piled higher than usual. Flyfoot easily strode through it, while Blackleaf balanced herself in the middle on the buried silverpath, raising her high enough to not have to fight through. The wildcat scented the air, stopping just short of the invisible line. The gray tabby on UnderClan's side nodded and flattened her ears on their arrival.

"Greetings, *esteemed* medicine cats," Windstripe said, bowing as far as the snow let her. "I am very cold and would like to sleep now. So I beg of you both to be brief."

"Don't test me, under cat." Flyfoot's fur was already bristling. "This no joke. Not in mood."

Blackleaf squinted through the fog, trying to scout the other side. "Where's Blueclaw?"

"She said if Flyfoot was still in, she wouldn't show," Windstripe said.

The wildcat swiped at the air. "You mean she scared of fire-fallers. They fly around all morning."

"She's perfectly fine," Windstripe snapped. "She just has no patience for you two. And neither do I... Now, let's pick up from those couple nights ago, I guess."

"At the part where we about to leave again," Flyfoot said, "because this still impossible to resolve."

"No," Blackleaf growled, "We were at the part where you were about to give us Angelika for your apprentices. You saw them, again. They're even better than the first time I joined Flyfoot."

"Are they really fine?" Windstripe stood and started pacing. "One of them had blackcough. How can we be sure that the others are healthy?"

"You saw them," Blackleaf said. "Only that older she-cat got it. And she's been isolated since then. No contact with her comrades."

Windstripe continued pacing, bobbing her tail about while carefully padding through the snow. Blackleaf glanced at Flyfoot. Her tail was slapping about, eyes fixed and narrowed at the UnderClan warrior.

She took a deep breath. "Flyfoot, what do you think about this deal?"

"What?" the wildcat said.

Windstripe stopped.

"Yeah," Blackleaf continued, keeping her voice low. "You were part of a clan in a populated twolegplace. They had to have memorized their territory's layout. How did they teach apprentices to navigate?"

The wildcat looked at the snow. "Wolfstar take apprentices far from territory himself. Tell us to guide us back by repeating path. Twolegs have twoleg-speak on blocks of silverwood to mark thunderpaths. He say never navigate their way. Learn directions, do not mark, see fixed landmarks, return same way you leave."

Blackleaf nodded. "So, they would never memorize the territory?"

"They only remember what they need to get back," Flyfoot said. "Never more, never less. It always enough."

"How much time did it take?"

"Many moons. We remember ways to get to other clan. Learning things twoleg way was impossible, so we only remember what we need and what direction we go."

Blackleaf nodded. "And you know I'm not lying, Windstripe. You were there as a rogue doing the same thing. Flyfoot has been the apprentice learning to navigate a twolegplace. An inhabited one at that. She knows how hard it is to get around when all their nests look the same."

Windstripe sat, resting her tail on the snow. "And? UnderClan cats are taught using some of those same methods."

"Less than ten nests on your side," Flyfoot growled. "We see them with clear days on high places. Counted them all. Tunnels closer to our backlands than your nests."

Windstripe shook her head. "I won't tell you anything about the tunnels. But we all know natural lands are much easier to memorize. And that's where your two were caught. A maze of abandoned, destroyed twoleg nests versus a wide-open field of snow with few trees and easy landmarks."

The three stayed quiet for a while. The distant rumble quickly caught up to them, just as always. The hidden sky-monster screeched overhead, blocking out everything but the wind and the crows. Windstripe crouched a little, trying to see it through thinner patches in the fog. But it was already gone, freeing their hearing and leaving a distant but constant rumble. Blackleaf was mashing snow between her paws, the cold quickly running up her front legs and throughout her body. Shaking it loose, she turned to Flyfoot.

"What about Littlestar? She was briefly a spy," she said.

She could feel the growl from Flyfoot, straightening herself over the other two. "Littlestar spy for short while. Get caught. She escape with help of rogue."

"Why are you bringing her up?" Windstripe asked. "The territory

isn't going to convince me. And just because it was hard for them to memorize anything, does not mean one of them doesn't have blackcough or something."

"I just said they were fine," Blackleaf growled.

Windstripe's fur began to spike. "I don't trust that look you're giving me."

"Stop talking nonsense. My word is all you've got."

"Why should it be?" the warrior leapt from her spot and hissed at Blackleaf. "You're trying to trick me with talks of those two memorizing twolegplaces, when they spent all their time in open fields. Angelika had it easier, kittypet or not." She approached, claws out. "You also said our clanmates were fine. Then I watch one fall over bleeding, being dragged away like some fresh-kill."

Windstripe crossed the invisible line into Shadow territory. Flyfoot was still.

"And you know what? You remember what you said to me on the bridge a few days ago?"

Windstripe's muzzle nearly against hers, Blackleaf started backing away. The warrior barely allowed any distance between them as she crouched to her height and moved deeper into opposing territory.

"You said only *our* medicine cats don't kill. That you demand respect and your word to be followed. You threatened to kill my clanmates before giving this a chance, even when another medicine cat made the initial request! And I was beginning to think about accepting your offer, if only to get *any* of my clanmates away from you and those badgers you call warriors."

Blackleaf growled, looking for her comrades; all were obscured by the thick fog. Flyfoot kept her distance and watched closely.

"You've already proven you can't be trusted," Windstripe said. "I know your clanmates are bloodthirsty. I see it every day in your littermate. But *you?* You embarrass your title for what? Some empty threats and a few moments in our territory? To think my clanmates

ever took your words to heart. Blueclaw was right. You're no medicine cat."

Blackleaf's hind legs were shaking as the UnderClan warrior finally stopped pushing forward, grabbing a bag on her vest and forcing her on her back. The medicine cat resisted the urge to rake her assailant's belly, claws out and ready to kick. Windstripe slammed a paw into her muzzle.

"At least you really are afraid. First I've seen any sincerity out of you."

She snapped her jaws; Windstripe barely moved her paw out of the way. Her fur shot straight up, but Blackleaf already tackled her. The warrior grabbed the vest in her jaws and easily threw her over, shoving her face in the snow. Blackleaf kicked up, only landing one hit before Flyfoot smacked Windstripe and pushed her back to UnderClan's side.

"Enough!" she yelled. "We make deal better. Take one warrior with apprentices. Then we both leave, sleep easier."

Blackleaf slammed against Flyfoot trying to tackle Windstripe. She grabbed her in her jaws and threw her away from the invisible line. The young cat scrambled to her paws and hissed.

"*Dummkopf* wildcat what in StarClan's name do you think you're doing!?" Blackleaf hissed.

"You fighting, not talking," Flyfoot growled. "You have one task. That not it!"

"I *am* doing it," Blackleaf yelled. "You're just standing there doing nothing while she *crosses our border*."

"Jumping on her not doing your task," Flyfoot said, trying to calm her voice and whisper. "She may said yes until you say something stupid."

"Do you have *any* loyalty to our clan!? Standing there while a comrade is being assaulted. I should kick you off this bridge for that."

"Think you can put scratch on me, little one?"

"Littlestar was smaller than me and twice my age. How hard can it be?"

The energy vanished from Flyfoot's body.

Blackleaf leaned close. "Maybe I'll tear the rest of that tail off. Or blind your other eye. I should grab a group and get them to shut you up for a while just like she did. All just to get you to stay out of my way and let me do the job you dragged me here to do in the first place!"

The wildcat turned away from her comrade. Her tail and ears were low, but her fur stayed bristled. She slowly walked away from the border.

"Is a moody exit wildcat for 'I don't care, do whatever you want'?" Blackleaf hissed. "Or did I finally get through that closed mind of yours after all these moons that *I am not to be messed with!?*"

Flyfoot disappeared in the fog. Blackleaf was still catching her breath, fur spiked and fangs bared. The sky monster doubled back and flew overhead, but it was far more subtle than the last. Windstripe was looking up, trying in vain to catch a glimpse. Her fur and mood had returned to normal.

"Before the sun sets," Windstripe said as the sky-monster rumbled in the distance. "Twelve warriors will wait at the line until then. Bring all four apprentices and a warrior, just like Flyfoot said. The one with the most injuries, *not* the sick one. We will give you Angelika. And let you see Molenose to confirm he's still alive."

"It's a deal then," Blackleaf said, taking another breath. "This is good. We are one step in the right direction."

The sting of the cold returned to her paws when she felt herself calm down. Blackleaf quickly hid her claws in the snow, but Windstripe was already looking at them.

"When you lunged at me, you were going to attack me, weren't you?" she said.

Blackleaf took a deep breath to try and slow her breathing.

"Not just tackle, but attack in full. Claws and everything."

The medicine cat was still, twitching her ears at the pitch of the sky-monster. Windstripe began walking away, keeping her tail low and growling as she did.

"Even if I never pinned you before, I've never seen you angrier. At me or at Flyfoot. What makes you care so much about this? And I know it isn't Molenose or Angelika."

The medicine cat flattened her ears, shaking her head.

"Whatever," Windstripe said. "I see now you're no liar. Just a self-centered zealot. Your title makes you dangerous, and you don't deserve it. There's too much Solestar in you, and I don't want those apprentices anywhere near it. And, sometime in the future, I hope I get to drop your corpse in triumph over the side of this bridge... Tell Flyfoot Blueclaw sends her blessing. That'll be the *only* lie you hear from my mouth."

The warrior disappeared in the fog, leaving Blackleaf alone. She pulled her paws from the snow and finally managed to retract her claws. Looking behind her, there were no silhouettes, and Flyfoot was long gone. She sat and let the cold numb her paws for a while, taking in the whistles and creaks the bridge made as wind gusts hit it. She pulled at the straps of her vest, retightening them. The sky-monster's hissing seemed to fade away.

Chapter 17

The group had finally stood still long enough to please the white she-cat towering over them. The big, dark spots on her fur clashed with the snow they all planted themselves in. Each of the apprentices was spaced out a tail-length from each other, keeping their stances wide and their eyes firmly on their leader. She waved her bobbed tail around, and the attention of a few onlooking cats was also on them.

"Flatten your ears when you are not using them," the she-cat said. "They can barely stick out over tall grass or holes in the twoleg nests."

"Yes, Solestar," the apprentices said in unison.

"Your target will be hard to detect if you just rely on one sense," Solestar said. "Use them all, and do not forget your surroundings..."

There was a thunderpath running directly in front of the group. Most of the onlookers were on their side of it, but on the other side lay a destroyed twoleg nest. The remnants of the wood and red-stone walls had long rotted away, leaving large silvertubes the length of a tree. Some of the tubes still held platforms of rubble in the air, but all of it was covered in snow or blocked from view. Underneath it lay a lone she-cat, stroking her white fur flat. She buried her paws in the snow briefly, the pulled them out and sniffed them. She nodded, peeking her head up just enough to see through a hole in the rubble.

"Blackleaf is already hard to detect due to her paws being scentless," another she-cat said. "Do your best to rely on all senses *while* keeping an eye out for unsuspecting ambushes."

"Could anyone really ambush us in our own territory?"

Blackleaf, barely able to hear the sounds on the other side of the thunderpath, perked her ears up at the familiar voice of the she-cat apprentice.

"Yes," the she-cat said, scratching her bald leg. "But our situation is unusual. There are normally more ways into enemy territory than one."

"You should listen to Christa," Solestar said. "Her experience in a more dangerous war than our own makes her advice invaluable. If she says ambushes can happen in our territory, then they can."

"Yes, Solestar," the apprentices sounded off again.

Blackleaf shook her head, watching the apprentices glance between their surroundings and each other. Ahead were the remnants of the tall silvertubes and the rubble tangled up within and around them. She spotted ways to slip over, under, and around the rubble while staying against the front edge of the nest and hidden by what remained of the foundation. The floor's remnants buckled a little under her weight. She took a pawstep forward to test its strength before continuing.

I hate navigating these things, Blackleaf thought, carefully straightening her tail. *They take so long to search and get through. I can't believe I let my mother talk me into helping her train the so-called apprentices. I already spent the morning getting Angelika back, and I need some sleep.*

Her ears perked up when she heard a growl from across the thunderpath.

"It's really hard to spot the scentless one when you keep staring at me," the she-cat apprentice said.

"I'm wondering how you can see that far," the young tom responded.

"I can't! No one can." The she-cat apprentice turned to Christa. "Your kit is impossible to find if she's scentless *and* too far for clear vision."

"She isn't impossible to see," Christa said. "Just very difficult."

"Well, can *you* see her?"

"Um... well..." the gray she-cat squinted her orange eyes, scanning the twoleg nest.

Don't fake it for her. They all know you can't see her. And how dare that apprentice call me 'your kit'. I am her medicine cat.

"I told you to stop looking at me," the she-cat apprentice growled.

"I'm learning by watching," the other apprentice said.

Solestar shook her head. "On and off the battlefield, you will deal with distractions. Resolve your disputes on your own, but remember your objective and your surroundings."

The others were too busy trying to spot to listen to their leader. The crowd of onlookers from the camp's side of the thunderpath grew. Blackleaf noticed several warriors lined up far behind the apprentices. Their tails were low and their ears were folded back, almost frozen in place.

Solestar's having the apprentices stalked during the test, again. I hope whoever is behind the she-kit slaps her when they pounce.

She stretched her front paw and pushed down on a loose silvertube in front of her; it held. She carefully pulled the rest of her body onto it, resting all her paws on its narrow surface and looking for another place to jump. She was in clear view of a hole in the side of the foundation.

"The foundation is white, the target is white, and there's snow," one of the apprentices growled. "Could this get any harder?"

"It is for me," the she-cat apprentice said. "because you keep talking, like you always do."

"I swear, I saw a dash!" he said. Solestar remained still.

"You always guess, too. That's going to get us killed one day."

Christa shook her head.

"Why do you always have to be so dramatic? You're never like this in front of Leaftail."

"Shut up," the she-cat apprentice growled. "If you weren't always so distracted—"

"Both of you shut up," another apprentice said. "You're making our whole group look bad."

The two glanced around before returning to their task.

And to think, that whole time, I was standing in front of a hole. If they bothered to look or listen a bit closer, they would've seen me.

Blackleaf leapt over a sharp object in her way, easily landing at a higher level. She kept her body low, since the wall that made up the foundation was not high enough to block her. She shut her eyes after looking towards the group. The apprentices still seemed occupied. The spectator crowd had grown. And Solestar was looking directly at her. The warriors behind the apprentices had gotten a bit closer, all still unnoticed. She continued crawling forward, careful to keep her tail low and move very slowly. Blackleaf felt her hairs being snagged by some of the rougher wood plank she slid across.

"She has to be visible now," the tom apprentice said. "There's nowhere else to go in the rubble."

"How can you see her path, but not her?" the she-cat apprentice snapped.

"If I concentrate on the edge of the nest, she will have to get there eventually."

"You're hopeless."

That she-kit apprentice sure knows how to run her mouth. Figured a scar running across her muzzle would shut her up and give something for the others to make fun of.

Blackleaf had slid herself towards the edge of the nest. There was a

small drop to get back behind the cover of the foundation, but would fully reveal her for a moment. She glanced around for other routes, growling when she could not find any. She slid her paw down and prepared to drop. As she did, she saw a large, dark-furred cat walk up to the apprentices. He looked at Solestar before staring directly at Blackleaf, who shut her eyes.

"Wolfgang," Christa said. "Care to help us spot my elusive kit?"

"I already have," he said.

"What?" one of the apprentices said.

"She just dropped down from above the foundation. Now she's behind it and hard to spot, but you should've seen it."

"Hah!" the tom apprentice said. "Told you if I looked at the end, I would eventually find her."

"But you didn't, mouse brain," the she-cat apprentice said.

"I caught her eyes," Wolfgang said. "After I heard her growl."

"I didn't hear a growl."

"That's because you didn't use all your senses against your surroundings. Blackleaf will get away."

Heart beating a bit faster, Blackleaf crawled to the end of the twoleg nest, stopped by a pile of sharp rubble and the corner of the foundation. She heard the cries of the apprentices and looked up in time to see them tackled to the ground by the warriors. None were able to break their pins; Wolfgang had tackled the she-cat apprentice, who growled at him. Blackleaf never took her eyes off the pair as she climbed out of the rubble and in front of the twoleg nest. The apprentice squirmed her way out and leapt in front of the older tom.

"You weren't even part of the test!" she cried. "And I still escaped."

"True, but I have no claws to hold you," Wolfgang said. "Most warriors will. Plus, Blackleaf the 'spy' got away."

"UnderClan can't have a scentless white cat, too."

"Why not?"

Her muzzle opened, hanging on words that never came. The she-cat apprentice curled her ears back and shuffled away from the group, who were each being released from their pins.

"We will try again tonight," Solestar said. "and go over listening to our surroundings. You will need to know this skill to be worthy of the name 'Shadow'."

"Yes, Solestar." There was less energy in their voices.

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The camp was flooded with cats moving about. Blackleaf was practically lost in the noise, if not for the warriors making room for her to move. The twoleg nest next to the leader's had warriors moving in and out, blocking the entrance and the space along the walls. She pushed her way through those who did not move, no one seeming to mind. Dozens were leaving camp through the thunderpath she just returned from and flooding into the backlands.

She stopped one of them. "What's all the movement for?"

"Solestar ordered us to scatter and search for any spot the UnderClan spies might've entered from," the tom said, "while there's a break in the weather."

"Has Angelika returned?"

"Don't know."

He scurried off. Blackleaf shook her head and looked up, noticing there was hardly a cloud in the sky. The warriors moved with more energy than she saw at nights. There were more sounds, less smells. They were breaking off into teams and marching away as quickly as

they formed up. Even her paw pads felt a bit warmer despite the snow. She managed to find a gap in the ranks and spot the entrance to the medicine den. Wolfgang was standing in front of it, speaking to Christa and the other apprentices. She picked up her pace when she noticed the she-cat apprentice arguing with him.

"But you attacked while we were spotting an impossible target," she said. "And you weren't even part of the test."

"No," Wolfgang said, "but I still managed to ambush you, even though I revealed myself."

"If you didn't come, I might've spotted Blackleaf. I would've had more time and less distraction if the one who was *supposed* to ambush me got to do so. Why'd you have to tackle me?"

"Honestly, I forgot your group was being tested today, and stumbled in on it when I got back to camp."

"*Really!?*" The she-cat apprentice yelled. "You've been the one giving us extra lessons. How could you forget?"

Blackleaf growled, getting the group's attention.

"That's no way to speak to a senior warrior," she said.

"You're one to talk," the she-cat apprentice said.

The medicine cat leaned close. "You want a scar on the *other* side of that muzzle?"

"Hey, hey," Christa said. "It was a rough morning for all of us. Let's just forget about it for now."

The other apprentices looked at each other, then at the she-cat, waiting for her to speak.

Blackleaf shook her head. "Don't tell me they follow you?"

"They don't," she said. "but I have experience in battle."

"The only experience you have is a lesson in not paying attention."

The apprentice growled. "He jumped over and scarred me! It was ordered by the same one who threatened to force mate and kill me the day you were promoted. Did you even learn his name? Did you even care?"

Before Blackleaf could respond, a large group of warriors approached. The apprentices attempted to stand at attention, but none were in unison. Blackleaf and Wolfgang walked onto a nearby mound of snow to get a better view of them and clear a path. Eventually, the apprentices backed away as well. The dozens of new faces were spreading out and making way for a pair walking towards the medicine den. Flyfoot was standing next to another all-white cat, her fluffy tail pulling up snow as it dragged along the ground. The blue in her eyes and the bounce in her fur was a stark contrast to the bald patches and faded color of the wildcat's. Passing by the faces of her comrades, she seemed to keep her head down and avert her eyes.

Christa walked up to their leader. "Is it time to go already?"

"Solestar isn't giving us much of a break since the weather has cleared," the tom said. "We're just waiting on a couple more hunters so we can find food on the way back."

"I still object to sending you on patrol," Wolfgang said. "You could get blackcough standing out there like that."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Christa said. "Fleetheart says blackcough spreads from cat to cat."

"Yeah, but it had to come from somewhere."

"Maybe one of the kittypets we took in over the moons brought it with them," the patrol leader snarled. "They always bring things with them. Why should a disease be any different?"

"I was a kittypet, once," Wolfgang said. "And I didn't bring anything with me to StoneClan but my collar and my name."

"Well your attitude made it here, so I assume you brought that, too." The warriors clearing a path to the medicine den joined up with the

rest, dozens in the crowd. They started looking over the apprentices. "I think they were doing just fine, until you interfered."

Blackleaf stepped forward. "They didn't find me, so they weren't going to pass, anyway. And on top of that, they were still ambushed after Solestar gave them a hint."

"And Wolfgang wasn't the one to do it," another said. "I say the apprentices get a do-over on the test. With you *not* being the target, and him *not* being there."

Wolfgang bared his teeth. "Don't worry. I won't be. Wouldn't want to infect the little ones with blackcough and attitude, right?"

"Hey, you need to show up to one and give us hints," the she-cat apprentice said.

"He shouldn't do that, either," the patrol leader said. "Sometimes, you have to learn to do things alone. You can't always rely on your ranking seniors to fill in what you're missing. That's why these exercises are so important."

The tom glared at Wolfgang and Blackleaf, and they back at him. Christa waved her paw between the two.

"Our hunters are here," she said. "We should go before it starts snowing again."

She walked up to the two hunters approaching and turned them towards the rear entrance to camp. Most of the others in the patrol moved out, the apprentices trying again to stand at attention as they walked past. Each of them glared at Wolfgang when they passed him, and he did the same to them. Blackleaf leaned towards him.

"I hope they didn't get to you," she said.

"They never do," he growled, dragging his tail through the snow as he passed the apprentices. "If your lessons came from warriors like that, you would've gotten more than a scar on your muzzle."

"I know *that* one's no good," the she-cat apprentice said. "Leaftail

told me himself... but I don't think I want tips anymore."

She stared at the large patrol leaving camp, the other groups parting to let them through.

"Come on," one of the others said. "Let's see how many strays we can spot on the other side of the silverpath."

"Good idea," she said, taking to the front of the group. "We should be prepared for anything."

The apprentices waded to the shallow parts of the snow in front of the medicine den. The flaps blocking the entrance fluttered apart, and they stopped and watched Flyfoot and Angelika exit again. The former kittypet still kept her head down, and one of her paws was wrapped in fake-fur. She carefully kept weight off it with each step; Flyfoot kept her slower pace. The pair was heading in the same direction as the apprentices, and after a brief glance they darted past them. The wildcat shook her head; Angelika's ears rose watching them jump the gray-stone perimeter. But one of them stopped short of it, running to the proper entrance and waiting for another to go through before he did.

"Superstitious kit," Wolfgang whispered. "You find it odd, right?"

Blackleaf's tail perked up. "Yeah."

"Glad to know someone in this clan has some common sense... you don't think the blackcough came from one of the recruited kittypets, do you?"

"No, of course not! He was just being an idiot."

"I'd hope he's not, though. Words like that diminish trust between clanmates."

"The crowd of patrols in the backlands are bringing me stuff as they find it. Some company would be nice."

"Is it an order?" Wolfgang's voice was cold.

Blackleaf's ears dropped. "No."

"They're the newest apprentice group, and I told Solestar they were too young for training. Least I can do for them is prove to her I'm right."

The tom started walking away, still getting looks from other warriors passing them. She reached her paw out, but retracted it.

"Maybe next time? When you're free?"

He looked back and nodded, but quickly padded away when he heard her purr. Blackleaf's tail dropped watching him leap the barrier to camp and follow the path of the apprentices. She felt, for just a moment, her chest ache before heading towards the medicine den.

Chapter 18

The moon managed to peek its full self between large gaps in the clouds that gently flowed across the night sky. Its light shined across the expanse of abandoned twoleg structures and desolate thunderpaths of the backlands. The snow fell as calmly as the clouds moved, forming a soft layer that was not as icy and easier to wade. The cracking of distant thundersticks echoed through her ears – the only thing to break the tranquility. Padding along one of the walls of the twoleg nests, she was careful not to let the stuffed bags at each side snag on anything. Their weight helped her wade around easier. Occasionally, she would glance at the moon between looking forward and for others on patrol. Eventually, her eyes settled on a pair walking the length of a thunderpath; they were quick to look somewhere else.

"No plants, as usual," Blackleaf muttered. "Lots of fake-fur and a couple vials of medicine water. At least Fleetheart will be happy."

She reached the edge of the twoleg nest, the wide thunderpath in front of her bordering the three nests that made up camp. Stopping short of crossing, Blackleaf looked down at her paw and noticed her claws were exposed. Her whole body ached at the weight of the stuff she carried in her vest, heavy eyelids threatening her with sleep. Before she could let it go any further, she snapped herself out of it and glanced at the patrols again. They were gone. She climbed atop a stone next to her and stretched her paws, free of snow.

"I would've slept if I remembered it'd be this bright," Blackleaf whispered. "Full moon, Blackleaf, how could you forget about a full moon?"

The echoing thundersticks whisked her thoughts away, bringing her back to the thunderpath. It was covered in snow, giving no hints as to where the dips were. The medicine cat sighed, lightly setting her paws back in the snow. She caught the shape of a large cat approaching, its fur blistering.

"You stay," the wildcat growled. "We speak *away* from others."

Blackleaf shook her fur and concentrated on Flyfoot's approach. Her eyes were low, but absent of anger. She flinched when the wildcat stopped right in front of her.

"What?" Blackleaf said. "Just tell me what I did this time?"

"It what you say at bridge."

Blackleaf looked away. Flyfoot pushed her against the wall of the nest.

"You know then," she hissed. "You know you said wrong!"

"It isn't a big deal. I was mad."

"You still—" She paused, glancing around for others. "You *no right* to bring up Littlestar that way. I want apology."

Blackleaf felt her head pounding. Her eyelids never grew lighter when energy surged through her. "What's so bad about it? You insulted me, I insulted you. We do that all the time now can we please just do this tomorrow?"

"You not treating this seriously!" Flyfoot growled. "You even think how hard is for me to hear that? You know how long it take me to bury that again?"

"Alright, sorry," Blackleaf said, starting to walk away. "There. That's what you wanted to hear, right?"

Flyfoot grabbed the top of Blackleaf's head and dunked it into the snow, shifting weight onto her shoulders.

"That same way you apologize for everything not work this time." Flyfoot's voice was trembling. "You have no idea what like for clanmates who live through Axin Mess."

"Our *comrades*," Blackleaf mumbled, stretching her chin up and out of the snow. "I got Angelika back and could be one step closer to getting your friend back, and all you can think about is the Axin

Mess? Are you even loyal to our cause? Or your duty as a medicine cat?"

Flyfoot leaned close. "Not lecture me about medicine cat again! You ever once think Shadows first thing on mind? It always the Axin Mess. I not want it to be. That what you not understand! That why I so angry with you!"

The young cat forced herself from under Flyfoot's weight, struggling to her feet while she stretched her neck.

"You know why Windstripe attack you?" the wildcat growled. "Because of mouth. Why Christa and Fleetheart worry about you? Because of attitude. All while you ignore clanmates' well-being."

"And what do I call you, who attacks a *comrade* like this?" Blackleaf said.

Flyfoot's fur bristled again. She lowered her head and widened her stance. "Called what you deserve. Only know how to deal with yourself. Care nothing about friends or enemies."

"How dare you," Blackleaf growled. "Solestar put me in charge of getting our comrades back, after *you* didn't want to. And for what? A clan feud during the Great Sky War? That prevented you from helping us right now? I got one of them, and neither is even clan-born. I know exactly who my comrade's enemy is, and what my purpose is as our only clan-born medicine cat. You don't seem to be dedicated to the Shadows or StarClan. You're just lost in the past, and you take it out on me all the time. I'm sick of it."

"There you go again! There you go saying stuff know nothing about." Flyfoot calmed herself down a bit and glanced around. "You belittle what you not understand. It infuriating! To watch you spiral into own selfishness. You escalate simple apology demand into all this. You angry little kit who not see, for *one* heartbeat, that she cause more pain than she think. You frighten clanmates. You no understand Axin Mess survivors– you not even try. And you cling to Solestar like loaner in heat to a dirty stray!"

Blackleaf's ears perked up, then folded behind her head as she tried

removing her vest. "You so blatantly insult our leader? The one who took you in?"

"You a terrible medicine cat," Flyfoot said, "because you not take everyone well-being as own. You doing Solestar wrong by not questioning her. She barely recognize blackcough. All she care about is patrol numbers and preparing strikes. What about surviving? Or help recruited outsiders instead of letting clan-born belittle them? Things *you* as medicine cat are to do."

Blackleaf's fur shot up. She crouched and widened her stance, hissing at the older cat.

"You know you in wrong," Flyfoot said. "You about to show me why you not deserve to be medicine cat. Why Stars never speak anymore? Because corrupted minds like yours exist."

"*Enough*!"

Blackleaf slashed at Flyfoot's muzzle, barely leaving a mark. The wildcat bore her teeth and reared up. She slammed into her chest and pushed both into the deeper snow of the thunderpath.

"Give me excuse to beat you, little one!"

She dug her claws deep; it wasn't deep enough. The wildcat hit her muzzle, hard. Blackleaf curled to one side, the bags of her vest weighing her down. She jumped back before getting hit again, tossed back towards the twoleg nest.

She was dazed, but found herself on solid ground. Blackleaf jumped opposite of the wildcat's lunge. Before Flyfoot could turn her head to see, Blackleaf leapt onto her back and bit down. She tasted blood around her fangs.

Flyfoot reared up and fell on her back; Blackleaf had scrambled away. She jumped over the wildcat and bit her cropped tail where the skin was dead. The wildcat screamed and jumped to her paws. A charge caught Blackleaf's sidestep and left them both in deeper snow. The bags prevented her from rolling over.

Flyfoot shrugged off Blackleaf's claws and pushed her deeper into

the snow. She hissed and lunged up and bit her neck. Her fangs barely wrapped around. Flyfoot couldn't shake her loose. She dragged Blackleaf towards the twoleg nest and slammed her into it over and over. Each blow weakened her grasp.

Blackleaf's vision snapped back to normal to see her kicked in the chest. One of her hind legs was snagged in the belly strap on her vest. Flyfoot pushed her over and bent her leg closer to her chest. Blackleaf clenched her fangs trying to free it. She dug her front paw in the snow and tossed it. A rock from it distracted the wildcat.

Blackleaf kept weight off her freed paw. Flyfoot recovered to take her lunge. She shoved her paws across her muzzle, barely scraping her eye. The wildcat flinched; Blackleaf leapt onto her. She slammed hard as she could on the back of her neck. Each hit yielded hisses. The wildcat flailed closer to a wall. Blackleaf turned herself around and squeezed her hind legs around her neck. The fur was still too thick.

Flyfoot slammed herself against a wall. Blackleaf's head whipped it. She did it again, hitting the vest bag as well; a small crunch came from it. Blackleaf was allowed to stagger to her paws. Flyfoot slapped her, hard. She dodged the young cat's swipe and slapped her again. Then jammed her paw into Blackleaf's neck and raised her onto her hind legs. Flyfoot reared herself up and pushed her off the ground.

Blackleaf waved her free paws. She couldn't hit hard enough. The wildcat's blue and blind eye blocked everything else. Flyfoot brought herself in close; Blackleaf felt the breath on her face from the seething growl. She only got serious again when she finally felt herself being choked.

"No..." Blackleaf eeked.

She spotted the blood on her paw. She felt a drop ooze between the hairs on the back of her neck. And when she felt the pain from Flyfoots hits, her heart began to thump. Ringing drowned out the sound of everything else. The breaths faded away. A surge of fight came over her, she struggled to break the wildcat's choke. The blue in her eye faded. The grays and browns of the twoleg structures

turned white. The red drop on the front of her paw was the only color left. It stung her eyes to hold them open, but they would not close. They were locked on the drop her fur absorbed, the way it warmed everything it passed, and the pain that came from knowing more was on the way.

She was dropped. Gasping for air, Blackleaf squirmed out of her vest and rolled into the snow. Flyfoot was being held down by two pairs of red eyes. They struggled for a while, but she calmed down when she realized it was over. She could see the trickle of blood coming from the wildcat's nose. The eyes of dozens of white blobs were on them both. The group surrounded the four, whispering at each other. She recognized none of them. The pair let Flyfoot rise, but she kept her head down. Blackleaf jumped when a mystery cat rested her paw on her chest, sliding it gently to her belly. Colors floated at the edge of her vision. The cat's eyes went from red to green. She calmed a bit when she saw Solestar lean her face close. She waved the crowd away; no hesitation in their departure. Fleetheart sniffed at her vest and pulled her muzzle back when she reached the bag. The sour odor washed over the area and disappeared just as quickly. Her heart sank when she saw the medicine cat's ears fall. She dumped out the contents and tapped at the clear-stone shards of what remained of the vile.

Blackleaf could feel Solestar's growl through the paw on her belly. "Flyfoot, in my den. Now... Blackleaf you... you wait here until I send someone."

When Solestar released her paw, the colors sapped from her vision. Her chest thumped again. The drops flattening her hairs returned. Blackleaf pressed her neck deeper into the snow, gasping for air again. Her leader glanced back, eyes bright red, and dropped her ears. She started to tremble as the remaining pair of eyes rolled her over and began licking her wound.

Chapter 19

The cloud cover had broken enough to let the evening light beam to a few spots around camp. It left lines scattered about, and they mesmerized the she-cat. One of them was shining towards the back of the medicine den, and she glanced back at it, too. Without a breeze, the scent of her comrades wafted through the hole in the roof behind her, keeping her at ease. There were just a few walking around, grabbing fresh-kill or cycling boundary patrols. Some were grooming each other and staring across the river at their enemy's territory. The she-cat was alone atop the medicine den, paw pads cool against the gray-stone. The rock that held up the fake-fur blocking the entrance did not budge when she rested her paw on it. It was colder than the rest. She glanced towards one of the nests, right into the den she knew her leader slept in. The view was out of range, but she kept staring at the blurry wall.

"E-Excuse me, Blackleaf?"

The voice behind her was light, and it hardly startled her. The blue in her eyes made her heart skip a beat, calming when she saw her tail carelessly dragged behind her.

"Do you..." Angelika shook her head. "Fleetheart said I should speak to you about what to do next."

"This is one of the coldest places in camp," Blackleaf said. "You sure you want to sit up here?"

"Is-Is this not a good time?"

"It's never going to be a good time." Blackleaf's ears dropped as she made room for the larger she-cat. "Have a seat, and tell me why Fleetheart would say something like that."

Angelika padded cautiously, sitting next to the medicine cat. She

shivered on first contact with the gray-stone, glancing between Blackleaf and her supposed target. One of the beams of light closed and opened closer to the distant bridge. Both turned their vision to it. Angelika began shaking her fur a bit, focusing on her neck and working up to her head. Her tail stayed still, and her legs shifted and bumped Blackleaf's occasionally. Each time she did, she nervously looked over to the young cat's indifference. Eventually, her tail slid over and could not be pulled back fast enough.

"Sorry, Blackleaf. Am I bothering you?"

"You've shaken your fur seven times. It isn't snowing or anything."

"I-I hardly knew I was doing it. I'll stop."

The pair's ears perked up when the whistle of a sky-monster lingered overhead. Blackleaf's dropped when she figured it was much higher than the clouds. She stared at Angelika, who was still captivated by it. She twisted her head slowly about, her muzzle following the sound's origin. Blackleaf noticed Angelika's legs were further back, making her chest puff needlessly far forward. But she kept looking the other cat up and down, watching her fur bounce from nothing but the subtle movements of her body. The strength in her stance and the slight mouth movements dominated Blackleaf's attention just as the sky-monster took her subject's. Eventually, she landed on her eyes, high above her own. The blue in them shined intensely with the beam of light in her background. Leaning closer, Angelika eventually turned her way. Both averted each other's eyes.

"You have no idea why Fleetheart asked you to speak to me, do you?"

Angelika paused for a moment, ears dropping, shaking her head. "Then, can I ask you about something else?"

"Is it about last night?"

The she-cat awkwardly nodded her head. "Sort of."

Blackleaf sighed. "You're new here. So, I'll forgive you for asking. Should I just start with what I know is your obvious question?"

The she-cat nodded.

"It isn't the first time we've fought. We argue, and one of us takes a swipe at the other. It always ends with me pinned under her tail, or being sat on, or being pushed into the river if it was greenleaf. But this time, it wasn't an apprentice disciplining her pupil. I just didn't want to hear it this—"

"Um..." Angelika whispered. "Thank you for sharing but, that's not what I meant."

Blackleaf's ears perked up. The larger cat shook her shoulders out before looking her way.

"I was... talking about the blood. It seemed like you were afraid—"

"Don't you dare..."

Her claws scraped the gray-stone. Angelika slid herself away, tense. Blackleaf glanced at her, seeing her shake. She dropped her ears and retracted her claws.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'll tell you about it when I'm ready. But it's... personal. So, if you don't mind."

Angelika nodded. The pair watched more emerge from all parts of camp to take turns at the fresh-kill pile. Blackleaf squinted to get a better look at it; it appeared as a black blob. She shook it off and took in a sudden gust of wind. Angelika shook her fur again, stopping quickly and glancing Blackleaf's way. They stared at each other for a bit before the sky-monster hissed back in their direction, still far out of sight.

"I never heard exactly what happened with you in UnderClan territory," Blackleaf said, breaking her gaze.

Angelika's ears dropped when she looked at her own paws. "I feel like I failed the clan over there. I mean, I *just* got here, and it's not like I'm new to holding my own or keeping hidden."

"You were a kittypet for most of your life, right?"

"I ran away when my owners couldn't feed me anymore. I wanted to be independent, but also part of something. This clan gave me a chance to do it, on recommendation of Wolfgang."

"Wolfgang recruited you?"

"Yep," Angelika said. "He was near those twoleg nests on the other side of the silverpath. Many of the strays hanging around there aren't interested, but I was. So, I joined first chance I got. He said my experience as a stray and my white fur would make up for my lack of clan knowledge."

"And it didn't?"

She shook her head when Angelika's ears fell.

"No, I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay," Angelika sighed. "You're not wrong... sometimes, I look at everyone else around me and thing 'are they really my comrades'? What have I done for them?"

"You risked your life to give us information," Blackleaf said. "Me, you, and Flyfoot aren't the only all-white cats in the clan. They were certain it would be a quick death and advised Solestar against sending two."

"But my reasons were selfish," Angelika said. "I wanted to prove to myself that I was just as independent from the twolegs as I wanted to be. Make those many moons I spent digging through their trash and fighting off stray toms worth something. But I ended up being dead weight for Molenose. I hunted and worked out places to make dirt without the under cats scenting it, but I failed the actual mission."

Blackleaf rested a paw on Angelika's shoulder. "You shouldn't worry about it too much. Molenose is a skilled wildcat warrior and an Axin Mess survivor with experience hunting down other cats. Finishing his mission would've been a small miracle rather than an expectation..."

She held her words when the she-cat shrugged the paw from her

shoulders. Blackleaf's jaw clenched up until she found her words again.

"But you helped keep Molenose undetected. Maybe one of the clan-born would've fought or tried to run if they were caught by the under cats. You weren't brought up in this war, and you knew what you needed to do. You had the foresight to keep yourself alive, just like when you left the safety of your owners behind."

"But that was out of necessity—"

"Who cares. Molenose specifically asked for someone closer to his age than mine, who would know when to be quiet and when to take action. Give yourself credit. You're smarter than you think. And you came back alive, especially when we are losing numbers to blackcough."

The she-cat's ears slowly rose. "Solestar did seem excited you got me back."

"Keeping yourself alive was better for her image than if you went down raging for the clan. Especially since you're new. Other strays in that area will now know the Shadows take care of their own—"

Angelika wrapped her neck around Blackleaf's. She felt the gentle thumping of the she-cat's heart and the soothing pulse of her purr. The snapping cold faded away, and she closed her eyes and took it all in, brief as it was. The she-cat nervously slid away.

"Sorry... and, thank you," Angelika purred. "The others haven't been so kind to me. But you don't seem to care where I'm from, and you speak to me like I'm a friend."

"Well, I'm available more often than you think," Blackleaf said.

Looking at her own paws, Blackleaf felt as if the fur hugged her legs a bit closer than it usually did. Even her tail was calm, almost draped in the snow and barely touching Angelika's. As the clouds rolled by, they took the lights with them. The onset of night became ever more present with each beam snuffed out. The breeze was a bit more consistent, and those in the clearing also began to disperse.

"I guess I should get going," Angelika said, stretching her paws.

Blackleaf's ears perked up. "Before you go, what do you think of Flyfoot?"

"But I've only known her less than a moon. And we never spoke like this."

"Just give me your first impressions," Blackleaf said. "I don't honestly know why I'm asking, but..."

"It's alright," Angelika said. "I'll do my best... let's see. She's really strong, and even bigger than me. She seems bitter, but I think she cares about us more than she lets on. She and Wolfgang were some of the few who didn't seem to care I was a kittypet. And Fleetheart even said I look like she did when she was a young apprentice in LeafClan. I wouldn't mind if I was more like her."

"Angry?"

"Well, not that part. But wiser. She likes to think, just like you. And she's been through so much, but doesn't let it show. Though, I don't know if that's a good thing. I learned a lot about you this evening, and I think no less of you."

"...What did you think of me before?" Blackleaf felt her claws scrape, hiding them before Angelika noticed.

"I believed what the rest said about you. That you were hard to get along with and argued a lot. But now, I just see someone who believes in those no one else wants to be around. I think you see a bigger picture in all this. It's inviting, honestly. I feel like I could tell you all my problems, and you wouldn't hate me, you know?"

"Yeah," Blackleaf said. "Sort of."

Angelika stood and stretched her hind legs, shaking her fur one last time. "So, I was going to go to the shrine and pray. You want to come with me?"

"You're a believer!?" Blackleaf's ears shot up.

"Sort of, I guess." Angelika rubbed her paw through the snow. "It's... reassuring to believe. It's growing on me. But clan cats don't seem to pray as much as the stories say they do. No offense."

"None taken. It's great to hear."

"I can tell you more about it, if you want to come with me."

"Oh." Blackleaf stared out into the clearing, then towards the river. "I... really think you should be alone when talking to StarClan. You can only be honest with them when you're alone."

"Y-You won't bother me. I promise," Angelika said.

Blackleaf shook her head. "You should go alone. Besides, I realized there's something I have to do now."

"Oh... okay."

Angelika's ears dropped a bit when she looked away. Blackleaf's did as well. She stood for a while, waiting if she would say something else, then walked away. The beams of light had disappeared, only the ambience of the evening keeping camp and her comrades in sight. The twoleg lights that worked around the silverpath and the borders of camp clicked on. Her eyes went to the fresh-kill piles, the blobs still large. She leapt down several small gray-stones to the front of the medicine den and headed towards them.

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The last of the ambient light had nearly faded for dark. It was just enough to let her see. Blackleaf was careful to not step on the wings as she dragged the bird downhill. The river was hidden by a tall pile of snow, fresh with paw prints and markings. Only a short wall of gray-stone broke up the white, a hole leading to a small inlet in the river where water pooled outside the current, large enough to fit a grown warrior. The crunching of the layer of ice was almost enough to mask her approach. But the wildcat's ears perked up and

backwards. Her fur was perfectly clean; all but her back. Her posture was straight, and her cropped tail was limp across the cold pebbles. Her fur blew gently to the right with the breeze. Blackleaf focused on the deep scars that ran down her back and across her head, running her eyes up and down the length of each one. Focusing on a new one formed a new lump in her chest, as well as each step she closed in. She could hear the wildcat's breathing. She stopped and set the bird down.

"I brought you a pigeon," she said. "Some of the patrols just got back, and I know you like them fresh."

Flyfoot said nothing.

"Windstripe told me to tell you Blueclaw sends her blessing..."

She stopped when she saw Flyfoot shake her head. The wildcat kept one ear pointed behind her, arching her head back just enough for Blackleaf to see her blind eye. She cautiously eked forward.

"Flyfoot, I didn't—"

The wildcat shook her head, fur flinching.

Blackleaf took another step. "I never wanted us to—"

"Stop," Flyfoot growled.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I mean—"

"Said stop talking."

"I don't want to fight like this. I don't want to lose—"

"That enough."

"Please! We can work this out."

"Said *enough*!"

Flyfoot's roar shook the young cat to her knees. She leapt away, expecting a swipe. A kick. Anything. But the wildcat sat where she

was, unflinching, shoulders clenched. Her ears were flat, but she refused to look back.

"Leave me," Flyfoot said. "No more talking. Not be friendly with me. You live your world, I live mine. Nothing left say to you."

Blackleaf opened her mouth. She could feel the seething between the wildcat's teeth as she prepared to hiss again. Her tail fell into the snow. Her ears still clung to the side of her head. But she did what was asked of her. A few steps back, she looked into the clouds. The light had nearly faded away, replacing the warm ambience of the evening sun with cold blues. The breeze picked up, making her shiver. The wildcat held her ground, her shoulders only growing more tense with each step Blackleaf took away from her.

"Take it with you."

Blackleaf looked at the bird. Focusing on the bite marks around its neck. They were deep, shaving the feathers clean off and leaving dents beneath the skin. The eyes were wide open, black and polished. She picked the bird up by the neck, the taste of its blood only then bothering her. The wildcat's shoulders had calmed a bit. But her tail began kicking up the icy dirt beneath it. Blackleaf, almost refusing to turn away, waited for even a glimpse of Flyfoot's blue eye. But it never came. Only when she felt her legs push against snow did she finally give up. The bird sagged between her front paws, her head lower than her tail. She began her short march back to camp, alone.

II - 'Lacerations'

The sun had already hidden below the horizon of the twoleg structures. The last of its light thinly vailed the fresh snowfall, reflecting onto everything else that could take it. The abandoned nests snapped with each gust of wind. In the distance, from the second floor in the nest, the silverpath glisten like new. The she-cat dragged her paws across the balcony, towards the sole unblocked den ahead of her. Her fur was specked with mud, shaking bits of it away as her paws thumped against the stone; she winced each time they came down too hard. She had flat fur across her back and sides, less so around her belly, from where the vest was usually firmly secured. The pinkish glow in her eyes was hidden by her low eyelids, but they kept staring forward. She did not notice her claws tapping about, or the claws of the one ahead of her.

"Blackleaf?" a deep voice called out. "Blackleaf is that you?"

"Yes," she mewed. "You wanted to see me?"

The medicine cat pushed open the wood cover and closed it mostly behind her. Barely summoning the strength, Blackleaf leapt onto the table to her leader's backside. Her cropped tail flicked about, and she was staring at the picture of the cat and her owner. Each step closer made it flick again.

"Why did you—"

"Claws, Blackleaf."

Blackleaf, briefly shutting her eyes, felt her claws bury themselves below her fur. The orange and brown spots on her came in full view when she turned to meet her daze with a glare and a curled nose.

"I can smell you," Solestar said.

"I haven't had time to bathe," Blackleaf said. "I'll find a heated silvertube and—"

"That's not the only way," Solestar whispered.

Every fur on Blackleaf's neck shuttered. Her eyes finally opened in full.

"Tell me, are you lying to me?" Solestar asked.

"Why would I lie to you?" Blackleaf said.

The leader sighed, facing and towering over her. "Then tell me what our progress is with these talks?"

Blackleaf's tail flicked about before cowering under her legs. "We... I am still trying to arrange a meeting with Windstripe. Every time I'm told off by one of her comrades."

Solestar's claws were tapping at the wood. "It has been half a moon since you joined Flyfoot in these talks. And when she dropped out for good, nothing has come of it. I'm considering just calling it all off. If Clementstar wants his warriors back, he'll have to convince —"

"No! I just need more time—"

"You have spoken to them *eight* times without Flyfoot present. And Windstripe showed how many times?"

Blackleaf turned her head away.

"Don't be meek with me, kit!" Solestar hissed.

"Once," Blackleaf mewed. "Just once, to confirm each side's captives were still alive."

"Unbelievable," Solestar began circling the medicine cat, lingering on every flinch. "We still don't have Molenose. If I knew Flyfoot would trade a warrior with those apprentices."

"I believe... we—"

"Why have you been so difficult around me?"

"I'm not being difficult. I just think we need more time."

"More time? More time for what? Nothing has happened in half a moon."

Blackleaf turned away.

Solestar nodded. "Exactly. It's not working anymore."

"What about Molenose?"

"Flyfoot refused to speak to UnderClan, even when I suggested she do it alone. She was done before you were involved."

"She would never leave Molenose to the enemy. They were of the same clan—"

"Let's talk about Molenose and Flyfoot." Solestar stopped behind Blackleaf. "Why would Flyfoot be willing to give him up?"

"She wouldn't. She—"

"Because you said it yourself. She would never leave him to the enemy. So why now?"

"Maybe she's put his faith in the Star's paws."

"Don't give me that," Solestar growled.

"Give you what?" Blackleaf snapped. "Flyfoot never stopped believing just because most of the clan did."

"How can you be sure she wasn't StarClan's answer for him? Or you? She had a chance and gave it up."

"Well..." Blackleaf tried looking at Solestar.

"No, don't look at me," Solestar said. "If it's something she would do, then why isn't she doing it anymore?"

Blackleaf's tail curled around her. "I think—"

"Why would she leave her comrade of *two* clans to our enemy? Out of frustration? Towards you?"

"Solestar, you—"

"Maybe it has something to do with bringing up her old wounds? Fighting her? Biting her back and scratching her chin?"

"Let me finish—"

"She almost choked you out. She could've killed you. For what? You losing your temper like a—"

"Solestar! Shut your mouth and let me finish!"

Blackleaf was smacked from the table against the wall. She barely saw Solestar's paw finish its arch after she hit the ground.

"Whose side are you on!? You couldn't possibly convince me you're right in this."

Blackleaf let herself lay, groaning. Solestar's fur calmed as she peered over the table at her. Blackleaf's head was curled between her front paws, shielding her eyes. She used her tail to hide the rest of her face from view. The older cat leapt from the table and seated herself a tail's length away. She stared blankly at the wall, brushing it with her whiskers.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Blackleaf was motionless. Solestar slid closer, but backed off immediately. She sat in silence for a short while, staring at the small cracks in the wall. Her claws were out; she retracted them at a quick glance. The remaining light shining through the clear-stone above began to recede. Finally looking to her side, she shuttered.

"Blackleaf, I'm sorry." She moved closer, sitting and resting her head on top of the younger cat's. "I shouldn't have done that. Let me look for a mark."

She slid her tail away from her face. Solestar peered into Blackleaf's eyes. They were narrow and looking towards nothing on the other

side of the den.

"... fault," Blackleaf mumbled.

Solestar pried the paw from the medicine cat's face.

"I'm not finding answers as quick as I hoped," Blackleaf mewed.

"Don't blame yourself." Solestar was gently stroking Blackleaf's face.

"Flyfoot still won't talk to me. You were right about me and her."

Solestar was silent, continuing to stroke Blackleaf's face.

"I don't think I am being as useful to our comrades as I thought. There just isn't enough time... I can't even figure out how to explain it."

Blackleaf paused, waiting for her leader to say something.

"Solestar... what's wrong with me?"

Solestar went back to looking at the cracked wall. Even when Blackleaf tried to meet her eyes, they were kept from her. The two sat while the buzz from the twoleg lights echoed across the clearing. The two occasionally glanced at each other, the other looking away when they felt shifting. Finally, Blackleaf uncurled herself. Solestar let her paw slide from her head and down her back before tapping against the floor when she moved away, ears flat. After a few attempts, Blackleaf managed to soften her fur.

"I... I am asking for your advice," Solestar said.

Blackleaf narrowed her eyes, claws scraping the floor.

"A warrior died of blackcough last night. An older one. More continue to get sick. Our comrades believe their superstitions closer every night, that the Star Covenant and Rye are to blame. The truce will end, and... I don't know if we are ready for what is coming next."

Blackleaf padded towards the den's exit, not once glancing back at

her leader. Solestar waited for her to prop it open a bit, ears dropping lower each time she heard her claws tap.

"What should I do?"

"I told you I wouldn't fail you," Blackleaf said. "I can't afford to at a time like this."

Solestar shook her head, closing her eyes. Blackleaf glanced back. The creak of the exit being pushed snapped both from their thoughts.

"I'm sorry... I still have faith in you," Solestar mewed.

Blackleaf was silent.

"I could never hate you, and... we can discuss Flyfoot another time. Don't worry about it right now."

The medicine cat slipped out the den without a word.

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The stone floors felt no better than the snow to her. Blackleaf padded slowly through the massive tunnel, shaking her wet fur occasionally and brushing its puff from her face. She kept her tail high in the air, but her head low. Sniffing at the ground, she caught the sour scent of thin-tar running along the edges of the walls. Even with her ears flat, she could hear the hum of the mechanisms from the inside out. As she turned the corner, the same yellow twoleg lights brightly lit the massive tunnel her path led into. She paused to shake excess water from her legs. The familiar tunnel had been emptied out. The silverwood that blocked all of the smaller dens along the walls had been removed, each one cleared of its contents. Even the back of it looked a bit different, going deeper than before with some of the snow and mud removed. She turned her focus to the first den on the right, still uncovered and radiating warmth. Stepping through it, her heart skipped a beat. Glancing around, she

saw that the twoleg objects piled against the wall had been removed as well. Before she could leap towards the fake-fur blanket, a muffled hiss scared her back. But it steadied her to hear it.

"It's getting to me, but I'm not dead yet."

A large, gray she-cat crawled out from under the blanket. The sight of her ribs through her chest made Blackleaf look away briefly. Some of the green in her eyes had faded, but she kept her head up in defiance. She had more bald patches, new ones forming around her tail and flank.

"Blackcough drives one mad, I see," the False Shadow said. "I'm not even sure I want to go back to UnderClan at this rate. I'd definitely infect the others."

"I told you I would help you," Blackleaf said.

"I hope it's sooner rather than later. I think I can no longer have kits."

"What?"

"Oh. Did I let that slip?" The False Shadow buried her bald flank under the blanket. "Just a hunch. It would be awful if it were true, so maybe I'll ask Fleetheart about it."

"Oh." Blackleaf wrapped her tail around her paws.

"I'm angry at something, I guess," the False Shadow said. "When my use as a warrior was lost, I would become a queen, full time. But that was just a thought I had when I was certain the war would end..."

"It's going to end, one way or another," Blackleaf said.

"Yeah. But not the way I thought it would... Ancestor clans do not adhere to the warrior code, so you can have kits whenever you want."

The medicine cat stayed silent. Her tail wrapped tighter around her

paws. She tried to avoid eye contact, glancing at the empty corners of the den. They let the hum of the lights light and the rumbling in the walls take their attention. The False Shadow stared blankly at the ground before forcing a ball of filth from her mouth. It sagged into a flatter mound once it hit the ground. She swatted it away and started coughing, shoving her face into the blanket. Her tail jerked violently around, but she did her best to hide her chest and ribs from the medicine cat. She stayed curled, waiting until she was certain it was over. She made sure that each chunk of pus was brushed from her blanket and into the corner she sat against, careful not to mix it with what had already dried. The False Shadow glanced at Blackleaf; she shrieked into the corner, hissing to stop her from approaching.

"Stay away," she snapped. "You aren't immune. If you get this—"

"*I know*!" Blackleaf yelled. "Did you ever figure I don't care if I get blackcough?"

The False Shadow's ears dropped. "It takes your kits, Blackleaf."

"Well, maybe I never want kits. I would've had them by now if I did."

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't. But this disease can kill you. Not just an opportunity for kits, but for life."

"Maybe I don't deserve either..."

Blackleaf let her voice trail off.

"What did you just say?" the False Shadow's neck fur shot up.

She stayed silent.

"Blackleaf, what did you mean by that?"

"I'll deal with it on my own." Blackleaf retracted her claws. "I promise."

"Don't ever think like that again," the False Shadow growled.

"I'm fine—"

"You *know* what I'm talking about. Don't think like that—"

"Can we talk about something else!?" Blackleaf cried out. "...Please?"

The False Shadow tapped her paw against the floor. Blackleaf finally looked at her, and the anger in her face melted away. Approached again, the older cat backed away, swiping the air in front of her. When Blackleaf focused on her claws, she quickly hid them.

"Your claws are dull now," Blackleaf whispered.

"Well, I guess it's all that picking my fur. Not much else to do around here."

"I... should visit more often."

"I think it's best that you don't."

"There are things I want to talk to you about," Blackleaf mewed. "Things I think I can only say to you."

The False Shadow's fur flattened. "Don't think you have to go through this alone. Or with just me. Whatever friends you have, let them help you, too."

"The help I want is with StarClan's absence. It's just been a hard day for me. That's all. Just a hard day."

"Do you want to tell me about your day, then? I'll trust you to tell me more when you're ready. Okay?"

Blackleaf took a deep breath, retracting her claws again. Her fur had finally started drying out, but it stayed spiked. She still kept her tail in the air, standing and shaking again.

"Cleaning fur can't be easy for you," the False Shadow said. "You don't do it in the river, do you?"

"I'm sorry, but... I just can't do this right now," Blackleaf said.

"What's... yeah. We can do this another time."

The False Shadow curled back into her corner. Blackleaf took a step towards her, but shied away.

"I wish I didn't have to leave you alone," Blackleaf whispered.

"It's okay," The False Shadow said. "I'll be right here if you need me."

"No, I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh?"

Blackleaf peered around the corner of the den's entrance for others before padding to the middle of it. The False Shadow backed as far as she could into her corner.

"I..." Blackleaf looked away. "I don't want you to think you're just here to help me with StarClan."

"Aren't I? Well, aside from being a prisoner."

"Not to me. You're more than that to me."

"A friendly face?"

"I don't know," Blackleaf turned around. "But I don't want to see you upset."

"That's nice to hear," the False Shadow purred.

"And if it comes to it, I'll even help you escape."

Her purring stopped. She waited for Blackleaf to speak again, but she stayed turned around, finally letting her tail drop.

"You're serious," the False Shadow said. "But what about—"

"You would rather not be a prisoner, right?" Blackleaf said.

"Well, I—"

"I wouldn't want to fail my kin, either. So, if it comes to it... I've decided to trust you. I'll tell you what I find related to StarClan. And, when I'm ready, myself."

The False Shadow's purrs returned. "If I didn't have blackcough, I'd hug you right now. You seem like you could use it."

"What do you mean?" Blackleaf mewed.

"Your legs were shaking while you said that."

She tensed up; her legs relaxed. Blackleaf glanced at the older she-cat and moved towards the entrance.

"We can speak another time," the False Shadow said. "You just take care of yourself right now. And I'll take no words on my clanmates as a sign nothing's changed?"

"Yeah," Blackleaf said. "Since the apprentices left, your comrades have gotten more of their portions."

"As good as I can hope for, I guess."

The False Shadow slid away from her corner when Blackleaf walked through the entrance. She glanced back at the captive once more; she was nibbling at what was left of the fur on her flank.

Chapter 21

The hiss folded her ears back. She was careful not to be too noticeable atop the medicine den, poking her head out behind the rock that held the fake-fur up. When it stopped, she sat and watched as it lurched back up again. It moved no faster than she could walk, but made enough noise to wake up a few of her comrades. Most of it had yet to pass by her, but the mechanism moving the itself and the rest of the snake-monster was too hard to miss. It easily towered over the medicine den, and was well over half the height of the bridge. The light mounted to the front illuminated everything ahead of it. It bellowed smoke from the top and steam from the sides, blocked by large sheets of silverwood. The whole of it was painted black, save for the bright-red wheels and everything that moved them. The detail in the long drum was lost to her, but she could see the silhouette of a twoleg in the tiny nest at the end. The other twolegs were walking behind it, able to outdo its pace, and grabbed tools from the black carriage that rolled behind the mechanism. She could feel the heat it gave off. And behind that were two other carriages without any moving parts and made only more noise to her. They were painted black as well, each baring the twoleg's red star on the side. It hissed again as the wheels lurched on its icy path. The night was almost ruined by the lights the twolegs set up, pointing them ahead along with the snake-monster's. As it lurched ahead, they took mallets and hot water to the silverpath. Another would brush it before the snake-monster itself rolled over.

Blackleaf glanced behind her; the she-cat's pawsteps were lost to her in the noise of the twolegs. But she looked into Angelika's bright, blue eyes; it was a moment before she realized she had been noticed. Her ears fell.

"Do you want to be alone?" Angelika said.

Blackleaf turned away, glancing at the snake-monster and flattening her own ears. She shook her head.

"Can I watch with you?"

"Sure," Blackleaf said.

"I-If I'm disturbing you—"

"You aren't," Blackleaf snapped. She took a deep breath. "What kind of medicine cat would I be if I didn't listen every once in a while?"

Cautiously padding forward, Angelika sat next to the medicine cat, staying her distance. The two did not even glance at each other, keeping their eyes firmly planted on the snake-monster. It lurched forward again, hissing as one of the twolegs began yelling at the other inside it.

"So, have you ever seen this before?" Angelika said meekly.

"Once, when I was three moons," Blackleaf said. "I hardly remember."

"Well they sure are dutiful to their monsters, aren't they? They're even cleaning the silverpath as they go along towards the bridge."

"I don't know why they even bother."

Angelika glanced at Blackleaf, spotting a scowl. "Well, they have to keep the bridge maintained. If it's one thing I learned as a kittypet, it's that twolegs hold their nests and structures in the highest regard."

"Other twolegs just come knock them over," Blackleaf said.

"Well," Angelika said. "Only sometimes."

"How old are you?" Blackleaf said.

"Huh?"

"You're old enough to have seen the Great Sky War, right?" Blackleaf said. "Don't other twolegs just come and take them, or destroy them, or force them to move?"

"I have a feeling this isn't just about my age." Angelika slid her paw to Blackleaf's; the responding growl made her retract. "I can just... see when something is wrong. I'll give you time—"

"No!" Blackleaf mewed. "Just... I told you before you aren't bothering me. You can stay."

Angelika dared not look at her. "Sorry if I'm a bit, um..."

"Touchy-feely?" Blackleaf said.

"I was going to say too old," Angelika said. "I know clan cats keep friends their own age."

"Are you saying you have no friends? Or that you're too old to be mine?"

"Um, both, maybe? Am I?"

Blackleaf shook her head. "The closest thing to friends I have in this clan are all Axin Mess survivors. And you're much younger than they are."

"Well, born right when the Great Sky War ended, so not *too* much younger... but I really don't want to make things weird between us. Not that we're 'us' but I just don't want to scare—"

"Are you *this* much of a mouse around everyone?" Blackleaf growled.

"No," Angelika mewed. "Just you and Solestar. And the other medicine cats."

Angelika shrieked back as the snake-monster loosed a hiss and steam in their direction. It lurched forward and echoed a ping that made the other onlookers turn tail before nervously going back to watching. Blackleaf yanked the other cat back against her.

"Don't let the twolegs see you," Blackleaf said. "They might come up to you if they do."

"They'd just want to pet us," Angelika purred. "It's not so bad. Their

paws are great at scratching and—"

"You're shaking," Blackleaf said.

Angelika slid herself away from the medicine cat, keeping a paw's length between them and keeping her head down. "And you just said you didn't like touchy-feely. Sorry."

"It's fine," Blackleaf said. "You got startled."

"You'd think living around twolegs would make you more used to their stuff, right?" Angelika said, flicking her tail about and accidentally hitting Blackleaf. Her ears folded back. "Sorry, sorry again."

Blackleaf sighed and shook her head. "Look. I don't care how much older you are than me. And I'm just not used to... your kind of affection. It's not that I don't like it. And that I won't get used to it. But seriously, I'm not going to bite you. So, don't be afraid of me, okay?"

Angelika nodded. Blackleaf grabbed her muzzle and looked her in the eye.

"*Okay*, Angelika?"

She nodded harder, letting her eyes linger on Blackleaf's. Another bout of steam from the snake-monster broke their gaze, the mechanism clanking to a halt further ahead of the medicine den. The carriages lingering behind it were in front of her now, more twolegs emerging from it. Tools in their paws, they headed for the bridge, beating them against the silverpath as they did.

"Was that all you came here to say?" Blackleaf said.

Angelika nodded.

"Well, you were off to a good start when you saw I was irritated with twoleg structures," Blackleaf said.

The former kittypet purred, sliding close but not close enough to touch. "Maybe I can groom you while you talk. Would that make

you more comfortable?"

"I groom myself under leaking silvertubes," Blackleaf said. "I wouldn't be very scentless if I let others do it."

"Okay." Angelika took a deep breath, forcing her eyes onto the snake-monster instead of the medicine cat. "Okay! Are you... okay?"

"Sort of," Blackleaf said. "Hey, you don't hate the under cats, do you?"

"What?" Angelika's fur shot up. "Of-Of course I do. Doesn't everyone hate those... dirty mouse-hearts?"

"You don't care about UnderClan, do you?"

"You wouldn't hate me if I said no, would you?"

Blackleaf stayed silent, waiting for the older cat to look at her.

"No," Angelika sighed. "I wasn't born into your war. UnderClan doesn't bother me. But being a loaner in some filthy hovel of a twoleg nest does."

"I assume Wolfgang didn't care you didn't hate UnderClan when he recruited you?"

"Between you and me, I don't think he cares, either."

"Doesn't care about *what*?" Blackleaf snapped.

"Oh, is he a friend?" Angelika said. "I-I shouldn't have said anything bad about him. But I shouldn't be saying anything bad about any of our comrades, right?"

Blackleaf's ears flattened. "Yeah. And he's not a friend. Yet. More of an acquaintance I have things in common with."

"Like what?" Angelika moved a bit closer.

"Oh. I didn't think you'd ask." Blackleaf glanced at Angelika, who eagerly looked at her. She brought herself back to the snake-

monster, still plodding along the silverpath behind the twolegs. "He's kind of a loner, even among comrades. People speculate about him all the time, and not because he's an Axin Mess survivor. He can be rude and distant, but I think he's just misunderstood. He's been through a lot. And he seems to avoid me. Because of my age."

"Isn't one of the Axin Mess survivors your mother?" Angelika said.

"Both my parents are. Christa and a tom named Karl who left to be a wanderer."

"The story of the Axin Mess came from a wanderer, right?"

"Specifically, Fleetheart and the other survivors. I heard most of it from Wolfgang, since Flyfoot and Fleetheart don't like talking about it."

Angelika nodded. "I'm sure Wolfgang will warm up to you."

"How so?" Blackleaf said.

"If he's patient, like you, maybe you could just approach and talk to him. Like the next time he goes out on patrol, you could keep him company."

"Not like I haven't tried."

"But you have a way with older cats. And he's a tom. Maybe you can even lay on the charm if words don't work. Hah!"

Blackleaf's eyes narrowed on Angelika's. The older she-cat curled back.

"I, um, was just joking."

The medicine cat kept staring.

"Are you not...?"

Blackleaf's eyes widened and darted away.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'll just stop talking now."

"That's a good idea," Blackleaf sighed.

The snake-monster came to a stop again. The light on the front flickered off. The twolegs in front of it pulled out smaller lights of their own, staying put. The one walking next to it started yelling at the one inside of it. After a few moments, he walked up to the front of the mechanism and slammed the back of his tool against the light. It flickered, but not for long. He threw his paws up and started hitting it again, making the twoleg inside yell even louder.

"Guess sometimes you don't need to knock them down," Blackleaf said.

"Oh my!" Angelika slid away from Blackleaf. "I made this conversation go all over the place. You mentioned something about twolegs knocking down their nests."

"It's okay," Blackleaf said.

"I'm sorry. We can do that right—"

"I said it's okay. I thought of my own answer, anyway."

"Oh..." Angelika's ears flattened.

The snake-monster's light flashed back on, the twolegs further in front cheered and proceeded towards the bridge again. The whole thing lurched forward and started moving. The twoleg inside was still yelling at the one who was hitting it; He was riding on the front and seemed to intentionally ignore it. Only when the mechanism bellowed hot steam did the twoleg jump off and start yelling again, throwing his tool on the ground.

"Twolegs can be an odd bunch," Angelika said. "One time, when I was a pet, one of their kits—"

Blackleaf tapped Angelika on the shoulder. She stopped talking and faced her.

"Listen to me."

"Okay."

"Everything I'm about to do is for my comrades. I pray it is."

"Wait, what do you mean by—"

"I hope you still believe I have their best interests in mind."

Angelika's ears perked up when Blackleaf turned tail and started walking away. She stared until the medicine cat was away from the top of the medicine den and around the hole in the roof to call out, but the snake-monster hissed again. Blackleaf pause and swiveled her ears back. She waited for a while before looking; Angelika was waving. She kept walking as the snake-monster hissed and sent another blast of smoke and steam upwards.

Chapter 22

The evening light was brighter amidst the clear skies, bright enough to keep the twoleg lights around camp off longer than usual. Blackleaf watched the warriors exit their nest from atop the medicine den. She checked each one, squinting her eyes until she saw a pair leave with scars and bald patches. She leapt to the side of her perch and down the jagged rocks to the front of the medicine den. Her heart fluttered a bit when she spotted the tom she was looking for. Christa had just walked away from him. His tabby fur was lush on some parts and gone on others. The massive scar that ran down his back went all the way to his leg. His tail lacked the length of the rest of his fur and littered with bald spots. He shifted his attention to wherever his chipped ears pointed. Eventually, they pointed towards her. A scowl crossed his face when they did.

"Wolfgang," Blackleaf said.

"What do you want?" Wolfgang growled.

The orange in his eyes was dull, but she looked away from their frown until baring her fangs.

"That's no way to address a medicine cat," Blackleaf said.

Wolfgang calmed himself. "Sorry."

Blackleaf felt her head grow a bit light staring up at the tom's grizzled muzzle. She checked her surroundings; Her comrades were moving around them and avoiding the central clearing. She saw Wolfgang's attention slipping.

"I need you for something," Blackleaf said.

Wolfgang narrowed his eyes.

"To help me look for medicine stuff."

"Why don't you get an apprentice to help you?"

"You can spot it better."

Wolfgang took a deep breath, his scowl returning.

"It only took you a moment to spot me during the apprentice's tests," Blackleaf said.

"Dozens of warriors with better eyes than mine could've spotted you," Wolfgang said. "If Flyfoot had both she could've, too. You can find someone else."

"I don't want someone else." Blackleaf had a scowl of her own.

"Excuse me?" Wolfgang growled.

"What do you mean 'excuse me'? Excuse *you*. For talking to me like this."

Wolfgang sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm just a bit angry. That's all."

"Well take it out on someone else," Blackleaf growled, claws out. "I didn't ask you to disrespect me."

"Look, I'm sorry," the tom said. "I shouldn't have snapped at you. What more do you want from me?"

Blackleaf growled again. "I want you to come with me to look for stuff in the backlands."

"No."

"Why not!?"

"Because, I'd... rather not. Isn't that good enough?"

Blackleaf leaned forward to the tom's chest; he nearly jumped back and swung at her, his fur straight up.

"What's your problem?" Blackleaf yelled.

Others were beginning to stare at them.

"What problem?" Wolfgang growled.

"You've always had a problem with me," Blackleaf said. "I'm trying to reach out to you."

"But why does it have to be *me*?"

Blackleaf's ears flattened as she shrieked back.

"Why does it always have to be me with you?" Wolfgang said. "I find out an Axin Mess survivor on the other side dies. I barely get any sleep because of that stupid snake-monster last night. And now, *right now* of all times, the frustrated little albino comes over and asks me to spend a night with her wandering..."

He stopped when he saw her eyes look away. Closing the distance he leapt back, Wolfgang saw the small crowd that had stopped to watch the argument. As quickly as he looked away, Blackleaf's scowl had returned. He found himself caught in it, and they glared at each other for a few moments before a pair moving behind her approached. One turned away and headed for the warrior's den.

"What seems to be going on here?" Fleetheart said.

The crowd began to disperse. Blackleaf hesitated to turn around.

"She's not with me, Blackleaf," Fleetheart said.

She broke her gaze with Wolfgang and turned to see the older medicine cat covered in enough fake-fur to hide her own.

"What's this?" Wolfgang asked.

"You have to make sure these things air out every once in a while," Fleetheart said. "Otherwise they'll get stiff. But you know what I'm about to say."

The senior warrior sighed. "Just a little disagreement."

Blackleaf's ears were still low.

"About what?" Fleetheart said.

Wolfgang glanced at Blackleaf.

Fleetheart shifted the blanket up. "Well, whatever it is, I think you should go with her."

"You don't even know what we were talking about," Wolfgang said.

"Whatever it was, you should continue *outside* of camp." She leaned close to him. "And away from prying eyes and ears."

"There was nothing going on."

"Do you know how easy your words can be taken out of context?"

"That's disgusting, Fleetheart. I'd—" He made sure Blackleaf was looking elsewhere. "You know what I mean."

"It's not that. The other thing you said."

Wolfgang shrugged, glancing at the few suspicious eyes left watching them.

Fleetheart stepped back and cleared her throat. "Well I think you should go with her. She's about to go get stuff, I assume. Help her out."

"Really, I'm—"

"And I can even let you borrow my medicine vest. Then you could carry twice the—"

"That's not necessary," Wolfgang barked. "I can take a hint."

Blackleaf's ears perked up.

"I'm not forcing you to go with her," Fleetheart said. "But I think you could use company for once. Just looking out for your—"

"I don't—" Wolfgang took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a while. "I get it, I get it. I'll be up when it's time to go, Blackleaf. You know where I'll be."

Fleetheart had already walked away, with Flyfoot keeping ahead of her. Blackleaf waited for them to be lost in the bustle of other

patrols before looking back at Wolfgang. The two stared at each other for a while before the tom broke off.

"I'll... see you later, I guess," he said.

"It'll be a new moon," Blackleaf mewed. "It really will be hard to see some things."

Wolfgang's ears hung low. He stayed for a while, waiting for her to turn back to the medicine den once she was sure Fleetheart and Flyfoot had left camp. The tom headed for the opposite end, towards the silverpath. Along the way, he growled at the group of warriors glaring at him. One of them kicked snow in his direction; he just kept walking.

Chapter 23

The pair finally slowed their pace, the medicine cat giving the tom time to breathe. The night sky was clear of everything, even light. The new moon was but a sliver obscured by the twoleg light they rested under. Empty thunderpaths and destroyed nests gave way to piles of debris amidst a row of abandoned ones, their walls and foundations still standing. The pair were startled by the rustling a friendly patrol made as it marched passed them; each belittling look made her uneasy, but they passed without a word. She took the time to adjust her medicine vest, shifting around the weight of a couple small fake-fur patches she picked up earlier. Only when she was certain the patrol was out of earshot did she motion to the tom.

"Are you okay, Wolfgang?" Blackleaf asked.

Still panting, he forced himself to keep going. Blackleaf kept her pace slow. The pair said nothing to each other as they crossed the barren thunderpath and down a narrow alley to the standing twoleg nests. The walls closed enough to make them bump shoulders when they walked through. Wolfgang quickly moved himself to the back. As they went, Blackleaf glanced back periodically; the tom's eyes were firmly on the sky and making every attempt to avoid her. She sighed, padding further ahead of him and waiting at the end of the alley. She emerged on a gray walkway running parallel to the thunderpath. The twoleg nests were packed together in a long row on each side, each having only minor damage. Their walls were much cleaner than the ones in camp. Some still had their colored paint and several different kinds of twoleg-speak etched into them. The area was relatively clear of snow, thanks to the holes that occasionally lined the thunderpath. But there was still enough piled onto the walkways to spot the pawprints of the patrol that passed them. Blackleaf glanced back again; Wolfgang was finally catching his breath. She approached him.

"Beautiful night, at least," she said. "Right?"

Wolfgang said nothing, letting the echoes of distant twoleg

mechanisms fill the void.

Blackleaf's ears dropped. "The search from half a moon ago closed a tunnel in this area. Keep an eye out for those, too."

He nodded, but she did not look back to see it. For a heartbeat, he let his eyes rest on her tail dragging through the snow. She walked into the middle of the thunderpath and shook some of it from her fur. Wolfgang looked at her sagging posture and caught up to her.

"Blackleaf?" he said.

She almost stopped, but looked at him instead.

"Sorry."

"You don't have to be." she said.

"I called you... a 'frustrated little albino'."

Her head dropped lower.

"That was out of line," Wolfgang said. "And inappropriate of me to ever think of you like that."

Blackleaf shook her head. "I got angry with you. I should've been more patient."

"Why? I took it way too far." Wolfgang snapped. He shook his head, keeping his eyes on Blackleaf's. "I don't want you believing I think something's wrong with you."

Blackleaf felt her heart flutter through her chest, just for a moment. The tom's eyes shined brighter than the twoleg lights around them. She could not let them go, and only did when he went over their surroundings.

"I know what it is to be in your position," Wolfgang said. "And you shouldn't have to put up with it from me. Can you forgive—"

"Yes!"

Blackleaf leapt close and rubbed against his chest. He pushed her away, flattening his ears once he calmed down.

"I'm—"

"I got excited," Blackleaf said. "It was something I wanted to... Let's just talk about something else."

Wolfgang was panting a bit. Blackleaf stopped, but he did not, forcing his way forward at an even slower pace. She pointed her ears to the sky, to her surroundings, but there was nothing to distract her from the breathing of the older tom. So she focused on him again until he caught his breath and noticed, taking pace just a bit ahead of her to avoid eye contact.

"Can I ask you something?" Blackleaf said.

"You can order me to speak," Wolfgang said. "You don't have to ask me anything."

"I don't want to order you. I want you to tell me willingly."

"That depends what it is."

"Earlier this evening, you mentioned one of your friends died."

The tom shook his head, sniffing his surroundings and closely checking every corner along the thunderpath before his fur puffed out.

"He wasn't a friend," Wolfgang said. "But he was one of the last of eleven from AchseClan before Littlestar disbanded it and surrendered. He was badly injured, and Burn sent him off earlier than the rest of us."

"The *hamburg* rogue leader?" Blackleaf said.

"Yeah. Those two should've ended up in LeafClan, like the others who left before our clan was disbanded. One of the captives is a *hamburg* rogue who fled before the Axin Mess. It's all he told me willingly. Everything was poison after the sky-monsters attacked, so it made sense that he died so suddenly... I can't even be sure Burn is

still alive, given most of his fur was gone when he left."

"Fleetheart said there were many rogues, strays, kittypets, and deserters who left *hamburg* early," Blackleaf said. "If they all left around the same time, they would've ended up on UnderClan's side."

Wolfgang finally caught his breath. "I used to take bridge and river patrols. Before you were born. Even the chance at spotting them... UnderClan is good at hiding their ranks. So, I gave up. Accepted that I'll never see them again, or they didn't make it to *berlin* at all."

Blackleaf shook her head. "But the Axin Mess survivors have a lot of experience. UnderClan is secretive of their senior members. We don't even know who their deputies or... or their medicine cats are. If they were accepted into that clan, they would be made seniors, too."

"I'm not holding my breath," Wolfgang said.

"Clementstar is a former kittypet from a faraway place. He would want the help of those with so much experience."

"Breathing poison air and being hunted in the night isn't much of an 'experience'," Wolfgang growled.

"No, no," Blackleaf's ears flattened as she rushed in front of the tom. "I'm sorry again. I didn't mean it like that—"

"Settle down, little one," Wolfgang said. "It's okay."

She did, but her ears stayed down. She stepped out of the tom's way and both continued on the path. He looked at Blackleaf several times, waiting for her to speak, before checking his surroundings. The area's twoleg nests were deteriorating in condition the further along they went, some having the roofs and walls collapsed like the ones closer to their camp. The area was a bit brighter with the light shining through the destroyed nests easier. Not a whisper came from them. He returned to the young cat, who did not make a sound.

"Do you not like being called 'little one'?" Wolfgang whispered.

"Don't worry about it," Blackleaf said, checking the area for herself. "But, aren't you concerned? Letting everyone know you consider enemies as friends."

"They aren't enemies to me," Wolfgang said. "And I would give anything to speak to them before we all go to StarClan."

"But Solestar will know."

"I don't care what Solestar thinks. And neither should you."

Blackleaf held back a growl. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean," Wolfgang said. "She's manipulative and indecisive. No one even remembers how she was appointed leader."

"She lived through the same twoleg war you did," Blackleaf said. "I think she deserves a bit more credit than that."

The tom nodded. "No one, and I mean *no one*, came out of that ready to lead. Have you ever even asked what happened to this clan before Solestar?"

"She doesn't like to talk about it," Blackleaf snapped. "And most of the warriors who were around during the Great Sky War are dead now."

"What about—" Wolfgang took a deep breath, coughing a bit. Blackleaf's ears relaxed. "Look. I don't want to argue with you again. We both have strong feelings about Solestar. Let's just leave it at that. But no, I don't care if she knows I still think about AchseClan, or its former members. They're more of a clan to me than any of these Shadows, that's certain."

Blackleaf's ears flattened. "What about me?"

Wolfgang stopped, keeping his eyes forward.

"I'm a loyal, clan-born Shadow."

"You know what I mean—"

"Leaftail's a loyal, clan-born Shadow, too. That she-kit apprentice you mentor and her friends are clan-born. And Angelika is just as much one as anyone else in our clan."

"I shouldn't have said that aloud," Wolfgang said.

"But you would still feel it," Blackleaf said. "I just wouldn't have known how you really felt."

"It's not like you're here mocking me like most of the others. And you're one of my friend's kits."

Blackleaf let her vest slide back to expose her shoulders. Wolfgang was still looking forward, fixated on one gray nest near the thunderpath's intersection.

"Can you help tighten my vest?" She said.

"Not now," Wolfgang said, padding forward.

"Why not?" Blackleaf said. "It needs to stay tight in case we start climbing or running."

He waved her away. "Can't you tighten it yourself?"

"I'm having trouble reaching the strap. It's near my belly. You just have to push it towards my head so I can grab it."

He sighed, turning her direction. Blackleaf quickly rolled over and stretched her head towards her chest, spreading her paws. Wolfgang looked at the strap, which had come loose from its housing near her hind legs. She curled her long tail between them and tried pushing it forward before looking at him.

"A little help?" she said.

"My Stars," Wolfgang mumbled. "Out of context was an understatement, Fleetheart."

"So, you and Fleetheart *were* talking about me with she said our argument could be taken out of context."

"What?" he said.

"You and Fleetheart are hard of hearing. Not me."

"Later on that," Wolfgang said, walking away. There's a hole up ahead."

"Seriously, I need my vest tightened." Blackleaf struggled to her paws and followed, trying to balance the bag's weights evenly.

"You might want to take it off," Wolfgang said softly, his fur spiking. "I told you, there's a hole ahead. In that gray twoleg nest, under some of the rubble."

Blackleaf dropped to her belly and started watching her sides. They had reached an intersection in the thunderpath. On their left was a gray twoleg nest, completely hollowed out. The wind hardly whistled through the small holes in its walls, but the lights next to them still worked. Wolfgang was close to what remained of its entrance, his fur spiked and his tail low. He held back his raspy breaths best he could before taking the first step into the nest. Blackleaf approached as quick as she could without letting her vest slip off. The light shined right through large holes in the wall and right onto what the tom had seen: a hole in the ground painted green around the rim. The block of wood that covered the hole was partly off its housing, exposing the darkness below. Wolfgang entered the nest, keeping his paws as quiet as their surroundings. Each creek of the floor made Blackleaf weary about putting her extra weight on it. Before stepping inside herself, she took one last look at her surroundings; nothing. She felt her heartbeat pounding just turning her head back towards the inside. She finally reached her paw over the small stone lip that surrounded the nest and onto its floor.

"It's clear."

She zipped inside and behind Wolfgang, who jumped away from her.

"That was me," he said. "Doesn't smell like there's anyone else."

"Is it marked?" Blackleaf said.

"Not either way." Wolfgang tapped at the wood cover, scratching away some of the green. "It's a twoleg shelter."

"How do you—"

Wolfgang pried his head under the tilted wood cover, heaving against it. Blackleaf walked over and, avoiding the sharp edges in the floor, pushed against it herself. When it moved up a bit, she reared up over him and pushed the rest of the way, sending the cover sliding onto the floor. Wolfgang was quick to jump out from under her when she landed on his shoulders trying to keep her vest balanced.

"The twolegs colored the entrances to their shelters," Wolfgang said, peering inside. "The only thing under the backlands are their underground tunnels."

"Do you think this is the tunnel UnderClan used to get into our territory?" Blackleaf said.

"Maybe. The warriors who patrolled a while ago *should've* found it."

"Then was it wise to uncover it?"

Wolfgang shot a glance at her. "We will reseal it. There's a pile of red-stones in the corner there."

"If I'm going to be moving stones, then tighten my vest first. It'll go faster if I'm not stopping to balance the stuff in there."

The older tom started sniffing the hole. The musty odor wafted with the stale air of the twoleg nest. He jumped onto the raised lip and poked his head inside.

"Hey," Blackleaf said. "Are you going to help or what?"

Wolfgang's ears flattened. "This might be my only chance..."

"What are you talking about?"

"A patrol. A single survivor... anyone."

He climbed over the lip and onto the first step leading down. He froze, sticking his tail in the air and waving it towards Blackleaf.

"But we need to stay absolutely silent," he said.

"Hey, no," Blackleaf whispered. "Get back here."

He was already climbing down, carefully making his way down the wet, gray-stone steps and out of sight. Blackleaf glanced around and growled. Balancing the vest, she climbed over the lip and after him.

"I said stop," she said.

He ignored her, continuing all the way to the bottom. The smell of fresh mud was almost overpowered by the fowl wafts ahead. The tunnel was big enough for a twoleg to crawl through. The walls were not carved of the usual stone and instead were wet and hardened with studs and small rocks pushed beneath the surface. Those embedded into the ground were already stamped flat, but made her cautious every time she found one jagged bit out of place. There was a small light further down, illuminating the hole that was crashed through the gray-stone wall that would have blocked their way. The proper tunnels were on the other side of it, and Wolfgang was heading towards them.

"Stop," Blackleaf growled. "That's an order—"

Wolfgang turned around and shoved a paw in her muzzle. She smacked it away, but he did it again, growling as close as he dared to her. They stared at each other for a bit before Blackleaf nodded and he put his paw down. He glared down at her, but she did not flinch. Wolfgang turned away to hold back his panting, but kept going. Blackleaf kept her tail low, but did not drag it like the tom did his. Wolfgang checked around the first corner they saw, a small indent in the wall that was practically obstructed by the shades of brown around her. He sniffed at the contents of several bags and boxes made from wood and fake-fur, all scattered and left open to the elements. Once the tom passed by them and continued towards the hole at the end of the tunnel, Blackleaf sniffed through them.

She pushed over one of them, making a loud crack against one of the studs in the ground. The tom glared briefly, but Blackleaf was still unphased. She slid a brown, clear-stone vial towards her bag, along with the fake-fur it was wrapped in. The vest slipped towards her side and into the mud when she bent down; catching it covered some of her with it. Wolfgang paused at the slops, but shook his head and continued through the hole.

"Hey, Wolf—"

Blackleaf held her tongue. The older tom was already out of sight. She was quick to follow, jumping through the hole at the end and into the tunnels proper. Her paws sank in a mess of mud and water. Her nose immediately failed her, flooding with the scent of fresh marks and a pile of dead rats nearby. Parts of the red-stone walls were smeared with their blood. The whole tunnel closed in, being too small for a large twoleg to fit. There was only one light that flickered near the end; the shadow of a cat waved past it. Blackleaf leaned forward, still trying to catch its scent, before approaching. She could hardly see anything ahead except for the large indent in the wall to her left. But she managed to hear the panting of her companion ahead, grunting and growling occasionally. She charged forward and rounded the corner to the indent. A massive shadow snagged her vest and carried her away from the light, slamming her against a wall.

"No—"

It slammed its head into her muzzle, pinning hers to the wall. She struggled to open her mouth but eked and mewed a few times.

"Get away from her!"

Wolfgang slid across the corner and into the shrouded cat. Blackleaf fell into the mud. She barely shook it off before a paw kicked her in the face. She slid out of the hole she came in through. Shaking it off again, she heard the hisses of both cats struggle.

Wolfgang reared up, but the shadow pushed him over and bit his paw. He hissed, smacking its muzzle several times. Before Blackleaf could stand, it snatched her up by the vest and dragged her down

the tunnel.

Blackleaf kicked at it, biting its tail as it waved by. The fur was too long. It tossed her forward, straight into the light. It cracked and flickered as she slid into the mud. The shadow began pressing her into it, barely letting her breathe.

The tom crashed into the shadowy cat again, both tumbling into the mud. Blackleaf surfaced and coughed out the mud before being pulled up and thrown down again. Wolfgang grappled its back and bit down on its neck. It hissed and fell, both kicking up too much to see.

It effortlessly tossed Wolfgang into a wall. Blackleaf leapt onto its back, clawing her way through the mud in her claws to gain hold. The shadow spun around, slipping her off, and smacked Wolfgang in the muzzle. It headbutt him and reared him up until he hit the ceiling. He fell into the mud, forcing himself to his paws to be met with a kick to the head.

Blackleaf grappled him again, but slid from his back. The shadow cat loomed over her and leaned close. She kicked and clawed at its belly; it didn't flinch. When Wolfgang got up, it wrapped its jaws around her neck and chocked her until her limbs were limp, tail flicking, and her muzzle pried open without a sound.

"Wait!" Wolfgang said. "I... I surrender. Don't kill her."

The mystery cat moved closer to the light. Both it and Blackleaf were covered head to tail in mud. The vest slid from her shoulders and into the mess. Its eyes blended with the rest of its face. The growl it made shook the medicine cat as he bit down harder. Wolfgang's ears flattened at the sight of her muzzle opening wider, trying to scream. The tom stepped back, letting the mystery cat move further into the light. He eyed the cat's paws for a while before holding his ground.

"I knew it," he said. "You're an Axin Mess survivor."

It growled, clenching Blackleaf's neck harder.

"No, look at my paws. So am I! You aren't one of the ones who left early by the looks of it."

He dropped the medicine cat, coughing and scrambling behind the safety of her larger companion. The mystery cat stepped fully into the light. The mud covered them, but there were several large bald patches near its legs and chest. The flem from its mouth was mixed with Blackleaf's hair.

"I would've never killed her," it whispered.

Wolfgang shook the mud from his head and chest, approaching the mystery cat.

"My Stars had I known it was you – it's me. Heavyclaw."

The tom's eyes went wide.

"I see you now," Heavyclaw continued. "I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you."

Blackleaf shook the mud from her fur, Wolfgang ignoring the bits that got on him. The size of the other tom rivaled that of a wildcat, almost reaching the low ceiling. One of his ears was clipped off, while the other was missing half. The bald patches on his fur were visible in the light, Wolfgang moving back towards the hole he entered from. Blackleaf stayed close, keeping an eye as Heavyclaw walked behind him with her medicine bags in his mouth.

"I can't believe it," Wolfgang said, his forelegs shaking. "I gave up, I thought I'd never see any of you again!"

He set the vest down. "I didn't think I'd be able to speak with you like this." Heavyclaw's voice was deep, and he kept it quiet. "Are, are there any others—"

"No," Wolfgang said. "It's just us."

Blackleaf dashed past him and snatched the vest, sliding it over her shoulders and having one paw in the tunnel they entered from.

Wolfgang shook his head. "There's no need to hide. I swear, he

won't hurt you."

"Anymore," Blackleaf growled.

"I'm so sorry about that," Heavyclaw said. "I... I thought taking care of the apprentice first would—"

"Do I *look* like a kit to you?" Blackleaf stepped into better light, shaking enough mud away to reveal the white fur underneath.

"My Stars..." Heavyclaw dropped low. "I just attacked the moment you came in range. You aren't injured, are you."

Blackleaf's tail stayed tense. "Why do you care? Killing or taking me would've been great for UnderClan."

"That doesn't matter right now," Heavyclaw said.

The medicine cat's ears perked up.

"I should introduce myself, I guess."

"I already know who you are. Fleetheart told me about you once."

"Fleetheart! Is she fine? She is still healthy, right?"

Wolfgang nodded. "About as healthy as any of us can be. Speaking of..." He pointed to the large tom's face.

"The journey to *berlin* was not too kind to me," Heavyclaw said. "But I am grateful I at least lived long enough to see your face again... And you must be, um, Blackpaw, if I'm not mistaken."

"You are," Blackleaf said, adjusting her vest again. "I'm Blackleaf, since your clan already knows about me."

"She's Christa's kit," Wolfgang said.

Heavyclaw's one good ear perked up. He approached, sniffing in her direction. She backed away, claws threatening to hit him. He looked into her eyes, his own almost covered in wet fur. They started to quiver.

"Oh no..." he whispered. "Christa would kill me if she learned I attacked you."

"Attacked is an understatement," Blackleaf growled, still backing away. "You almost *killed* me."

The large tom stepped back and bowed. "I truly am sorry for that. I would've never killed you, I swear on my life. I just... didn't know who you were... You are a sight to behold. I am glad to know Christa and the others made it safely."

"Not all of us," Wolfgang snapped.

He stared off down the tunnel. Heavyclaw looked at him for a while, until he appeared to understand. His ear fell and he lowered his head to whispered to himself. A breeze from outside began to whistle down the tunnel, breaking the cozy warmth for a moment. Wolfgang bared his teeth, his paws clenching as he took a deep breath to calm himself. Blackleaf walked up to him.

"Who are you talking about?" she said.

"Don't worry about it," Wolfgang said.

"I told you, I'm—"

"Not this time, Blackleaf," he snapped. "Not now just... just let me catch up with Heavyclaw. It may be the only chance I see him."

Heavyclaw glanced about for something else to focus on, coming to Blackleaf's vest. "Um, your vest is too loose to carry anything."

"I know," Blackleaf growled. "*Someone* was supposed to help tighten it."

Wolfgang was still looking away.

"You knocking me senseless doesn't help," she continued. "But what are you even doing down here, anyway? This close to our territory."

Heavyclaw narrowed what showed of his eyes.

"We will seal the tunnel right when we leave," Wolfgang said. "You shouldn't have to break the loyalty of your adopted clan. But it seems like you've been down here for—"

"Three days and four nights," Heavyclaw said. "I was specifically looking for this place."

"And this is the tunnel where your comrades infiltrated our camp?" Blackleaf said.

Heavyclaw hesitated, but nodded. "I cannot tell you where I rank in the clan, or why I'm here. I have already betrayed Clementstar enough by just talking to you."

"We are still clanmates in my eyes," Wolfgang said. "I would sooner betray Solestar than you."

Blackleaf glared at the two.

"Those are troubling words," Heavyclaw said.

"I wish I could tell you the half of it," Wolfgang whispered, taking another deep breath. "I wish..."

Heavyclaw nodded. "When I finally return to camp, I will sleep peacefully for the first time in a long time. I patrol far from our borders, and news comes slowly. Seeing you like this, and the kin of my former clanmate, is the greatest gift I could hope to receive in my remaining life... I want you to make it through this, Wolfgang. We spent so long surviving two wars. I would be devastated to hear you, or Fleetheart, or any of them, die in one like this."

"What do you mean 'one like this'?" Blackleaf said.

"I mean one out of hatred instead of survival," Heavyclaw said. "No matter what, I will always think of you as my apprentice, Wolfgang. I can't help but worry about you."

Wolfgang's breathing calmed. "You always knew what to say... Sometimes, I dream we are all together in the same clan. So that we can all see each other. And reminisce... and say goodbye—"

"We will all be together in StarClan," Heavyclaw said. "We will all roam the moors of silverpelt. And say hello at last. StarClan was not with us in *hamburg*, but we must believe their world is better than this one the twolegs ravaged."

The tom kept his eyes to the ground. "Do they still believe?"

"Every last one of them," Heavyclaw said.

Blackleaf sniffed the air, moving closer to Wolfgang. He stepped away.

"I smell fresh blood," Blackleaf said. "Wolfgang, your leg—"

"It's fine," he barked. "It's just a scratch."

"I found some stuff while I was down here," Heavyclaw said. "Some of it is twoleg medicine. Feel free to take it with you."

"You're also injured," Wolfgang said. "Your neck."

Heavyclaw shook his head. "She can't. Her scent will come back with me to UnderClan."

"She doesn't have a scent. She can help you."

"I didn't offer," Blackleaf growled.

"Stars above she's scentless, too!?" Heavyclaw approached, sniffing the air. The medicine cat growled at him. "I-I didn't notice. My nose isn't as good as it used to be... But tell me, do you truly have no scent?"

"Why does it matter so much to you?" Blackleaf said.

"It... It shouldn't. It's just a curiosity. Littlestar had no scent. And now you, her kin's kit, also have no scent. Do you also believe in StarClan?"

"What kind of medicine cat do you think I am?"

Heavyclaw sighed. "It is good to know there is some joy to remain

in my life."

Wolfgang's ears perked up. "You're okay, though. Right?"

"It isn't me. It's..." Heavyclaw looked behind him, motioning the pair to lean closer. Blackleaf did not, but swiveled her ears towards the tom's. "Things are about to get desperate for UnderClan and the Shadows. The fighting will soon resume, worse than before, and you may be called to battle... The Axin Mess survivors cannot betray Clementstar to spare your life."

"As long as I live, they won't get anywhere near the others," Wolfgang said.

"You haven't been completely lost to the Axin Mess," Heavyclaw said. "The others first, just like in StoneClan... Stay close to Christa's kit. I'd hate to see her harmed in any of this."

Blackleaf growled, stepping up to Heavyclaw. "Don't *for a heartbeat* think that I am one of you. I am a loyal clan-born medicine cat to the Clan of False Shadows. To my comrades."

Wolfgang pulled her away by the vest. Blackleaf's claws scraped past the mud and onto the stone beneath it. The light down the hall flickered and dimmed a bit, the low hum it started making buzzed through their ears and out towards the twoleg nest they entered from. Blackleaf's ears swiveled back; one of the lights outside on the surface also began to buzz. Heavyclaw dipped his head, backing away from the pair.

"It would be selfish to impose my memory of Littlestar onto you," Heavyclaw said. "You share her scentless trait, but not her mind or body. I'm sorry for even thinking otherwise."

Wolfgang's eyes softened, looking over the loose vest that the medicine cat continued pushing over her shoulders with each movement she made.

"I beg you not to tell Solestar of my presence, or our meeting. Or the others. I swear I am here with no ill intentions."

Wolfgang shook his head. "Fleetheart, Flyfoot, and Christa would

never put you in danger like that. And no one else would know."

"It's dangerous enough that one with no ties to the Axin Mess is present. Or that I stayed for this long."

"She won't tell anyone! Please, just say more about the others."

"It is already past moonhigh. And both clans always double their patrols for new moons. It only increases the odds we are accidentally discovered."

"No, wait! There are no patrols near us, I swear—"

"Wolfgang. It's... unfortunately time we went back to our clans."

The tom sighed. "I'll... You're right about Blackleaf."

The medicine cat looked at him.

"You know who she reminds me of," Wolfgang said softly. "And she isn't her, either. I promise, I won't let anything bad happen to her, or the others. And I'll keep this to myself."

"Oh?" Heavyclaw said.

"Yeah... thanks for being a great mentor. Even now."

"Your resilience makes me proud, Wolfgang. Take care of those you love."

"I will... Goodbye, Heavyclaw."

The large tom dipped his head towards Blackleaf before rolling in the slosh, reapplying his muddy coat. He looked at the pair one last time, and purred, before padding down the tunnel and around the lit corner. Wolfgang lingered until he could no longer hear the careful sloshing. Closing his eyes, he mouthed something to himself. Blackleaf had already went through the hole in the gray-stone, returning to the original tunnel. She was sniffing at the twoleg stuff that was piled to the side, just as she found it.

"Blackleaf," Wolfgang said, following her.

She pushed her vest up.

"I'll help you bring that stuff to the surface. You'll want to take that thing off to help me seal this tunnel."

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A slight breeze flowed across the area, whistling through every little hole in what was left of the twoleg nest. The pair slid the last red-stone they could find over the raised lip and into the hole. Blackleaf stuck her nose in what remained of the tunnel's opening as Wolfgang kneeled under one of the boards he previously pushed aside. There was just a small dot of light coming from the mess of stones they threw into it. The foul smell of the dead rats still lingered and the warmth of its stale air enticed her to sniff for anything else before moving. She helped the tom lift the wood cover he moved to get in. She looked up; the stars were nowhere to be found, and the moon sliver had moved a bit.

"We tell Solestar about the hole," Blackleaf said.

"Yeah," Wolfgang said. "I think Heavyclaw's mission was to expose it. UnderClan would never be able to surface and seal it themselves. And there must be a path underground that leads from here to their camp."

"Smaller warriors can slip through the crack we couldn't get. More will come when it's day to block that."

"Good... I just want to sleep for a while. And think."

The tom shook his fur, bits of dried mud flinging about. Blackleaf did the same, glancing at the fake-fur she had wrapped around Wolfgang's injured leg. He walked towards the medicine vest, picking it up and dropping it next to the medicine cat.

He sighed. "Let's get this over with."

Blackleaf slipped her legs through the harnesses and slid the whole thing over her shoulders. She rolled over on her back and leaned close to the loose strap between her legs. Wolfgang walked over and pulled it closer to her muzzle. She grabbed it and pulled tight, pressing the whole thing into her chest. The tom had already walked outside, taking deep breaths and looking towards the moon. She shook her head and padded towards him, making sure the green side of the wood cover was up before exiting the nest herself.

"I know it wasn't *that* hard for you," she said.

He waited a while, still catching his breath. "It's from moving the red-stone."

Once his breathing was normal, he started retracing their steps down the dimly lit thunderpath. When Blackleaf joined him, he flinched, but did not distance himself.

"Is it really that hard for you to be near me?" she said.

Wolfgang kept his eyes forward.

"What is it about me that makes you keep your distance? Do I remind you of someone?"

He kept to himself.

"Is it the one Heavyclaw mentioned?"

"I never told you, or anyone, about her. The Axin Mess survivors in our clan knew her."

Blackleaf's ears fell, and she kept her eyes ahead. The breeze flowed from her right, past her and onto Wolfgang. He sniffed at the air for a while, quietly in her direction.

"Heavyclaw was right," Wolfgang said. "It isn't right for me to think of you as her just because you share some traits."

"What traits?" Blackleaf said.

"You have an extremely faint scent. It's exactly like hers."

"And when you're helping with my vest, among other things... Actually, if this is too much—"

"You'll just ask again," Wolfgang said, "and maybe when we aren't alone like this. I don't want to give the others any more about my life to use against me."

She nodded.

"Her name was Shortfang. She was my mate."

Blackleaf's ears perked up.

"She had stubby legs, hence the name, and sharp, brown fur. Very shy and usually alone, until our second war with LeafClan started. She injured the wildcat's shortest-lived leader, Eaglestar, aiding Longstar in his last fight. She was promoted to help integrate the rogues and pets into AchseClan ranks. She even lost an ear, and took it like a veteran. Things just kind of... grew from there."

Wolfgang paused, keeping his ears folded back.

"I'm not judging you," Blackleaf said.

"The snake-monster we rode to flee *hamburg* was attacked by sky-monsters. Bits of silverwood pelted her... She was hard to recognize, but she never complained. She died at the end of that day, on my back. Her scent and her voice are the last good memories I have of her."

"I'm—"

"Don't apologize," he said. "You had nothing to do with it... Axin Mess survivors hardly carry a scent, among other things lost. Catching Shortfang's on you just..."

"Was too much?" Blackleaf said.

"It's frustrating," Wolfgang growled. "Knowing that you are not her, but share so many of her traits."

Blackleaf took a deep breath. "I'm a medicine cat, Wolfgang. I'm

here to help you live your best life. And, I know you won't just forget about her, or your former life. But I am not Shortfang."

"I know," Wolfgang sighed. "I should be the one apologizing to you... again."

"I'm not mad, and I won't judge you like the others... Sometimes, I even see a lot of you in myself."

"Because we both get angry easily?"

"Because we're both grounded. It isolates us sometimes... and maybe it doesn't have to be that way. Not with us."

Wolfgang seized up, a shiver running through his fur.

"I'm not just your friend's kit," Blackleaf said. "I'm a she-cat with my own aspirations. And my own preferences, and desires."

She saw his fangs bare slightly, before he swallowed and dared to glance at her. When she leaned close, he backed away. Ears flat, Blackleaf continued on her way. The tom hardly realized he stopped and followed, but at a slight distance. She hardly glanced behind her; each time disappointing with the tom looking at everything but her. Blackleaf's heart thumped through her chest. They were closing in on nests with undamaged walls again, and under the working lights next to the thunderpath. The breeze was coming from her right; he moved to her right. His ears darted about, head towering above her. When he started to growl, she stopped and faced him. His muzzle was sharp to her left, eyes wide and skimming every dark corner of a twoleg nest. Blackleaf saw a shadowy form dart under one of the dimmer lights. She caught a glimpse of a pair of green eyes – and a split tail.

Chapter 24

Despite the sunlight pouring onto the bridge, it was not warm. The snow beneath her paws was just as cold as everything else around her. The river below was still covered by the slow blocks of ice on its surface, the crunching loud and clear without the noise of wind or the creaking of the bridge. She passed the beams that protruded from the ground, the holes and bumps at their base visible with the snow cleared. The stairs that led below were visible, cleared by the twolegs, several warriors changing patrols as she walked past it. The snow had covered much of the bridge again, but she was able to see the wood and silverwood underneath whenever her paws parted it. Each beam that hung over her head cast a deep shadow across her path, leaving the silverpath clear and gleaming, raised less than half her height from the ground.

Adjusting the medicine vest to her shoulders again, Blackleaf waved her tail left and right. The dozens of warriors at her side fell in line behind her, stretching to each end of the bridge. She saw the nervous group of blobs far ahead of her run to new positions and match the size of the line. Her destination was guarded by her own comrades and UnderClan's warriors, standing far out of striking distance but close enough for her to hear the last of the insults they hissed at each other. She immediately recognized the split tail of her littermate, and a smaller one standing next to him. Both were looking over the left edge of the bridge, towards Covenant territory. When she passed, he approached. Blackleaf recognized the she-cat apprentice as she padded towards the friendly side of the bridge. Nearing the invisible border line, she stopped in the shade of one of the beams and waved the other warriors off. After a few moments, a lone UnderClan cat did the same, waiting crouched at the line. Leaftail remained.

"Go with them, Leaftail," Blackleaf said.

He shook his head. "There is nothing more to gain. Whoever is there might attack you."

"It's either going to be Blueclaw or Windstripe. And Windstripe would only attack if *you* were there. Now go."

"Blueclaw could attack."

"She's too old to do anything like that."

Leaftail looked back, making sure the she-cat apprentice was gone.

"And I thought I told you if I saw her at the bridge again, I would beat her," Blackleaf growled.

"Come on," he said. "The way you handled it the first time didn't teach her anything."

"Well that's her fault, not mine."

Blackleaf continued her approach, but Leaftail grabbed her vest and slid her back. She kicked him away and hissed, keeping her voice low.

"What's your problem?" she said. "I am your superior. When I give you an order, I expect—"

"I..."

"You what?"

Leaftail hesitated, scratching the silverwood with his claws. His tail flicked about before he shook his head.

"I said *go*!" she yelled. "I don't have time for this right now."

Leaftail calmed himself down. Her escort, far behind her, had looked on when she started yelling. The tom flicked his tail and slapped it against the ground; they returned to their positions. Blackleaf glared at a few of them, her breathing quick. Her eyes fell on her sympathetic littermate for a moment before he left to join the others. She padded once more towards the border line, calming herself when her breathing was the only thing she heard. The blue-tinted fur and gray muzzle of the old she-cat came into view. Blueclaw was already sitting, and had her warriors even further

away than Blackleaf's.

She cleared her throat. "I w-would have waited for you to finish talking to your littermate. That should come first."

"Where's Windstripe?" Blackleaf said.

"If Panzer were here, she-she would make some disgusting joke about the two of you being perfect mates—"

"Blueclaw, *please*." Blackleaf's voice trembled towards the end, making her look away.

"The little one sort of learned manners," the old she-cat said. "Guess someone finally beat them into you. Flyfoot maybe?"

Blackleaf sat and started nervously adjusting her vest.

Blueclaw sighed. "Windstripe made good on her promise. She is done with this."

"Is there any way..." Blackleaf's voice trailed off.

"I-I think it is over. Windstripe said it has been miss after miss since you got Angelika back. Been half a moon of nothing. And Clementstar's patience is out."

"Surely we can't just..."

"Spit it out, kit!" Blueclaw hissed. "Where has your fire gone? Might as well be dead."

"Just trade both sides back," Blackleaf said, snapping back into the conversation.

"We went over that. It-It is not going to happen."

Blackleaf sighed. "Because once I leave here, the truce is over."

Blueclaw's tail flicked. "Oh well. So be it."

"So be it? What about your comrades? The warriors on our side—"

"They are *not* my comrades. They are not my clanmates. I-I cannot even call them my friends. They are a large clan who just happened to be where the snake-monster I rode in stopped."

The medicine cat opened her muzzle, but said nothing. She retracted her claws, which the old she-cat had already caught sight of. She briefly looked past Blueclaw and towards the UnderClan warriors.

"I spoke to Heavyclaw." Blackleaf moved close. "When we found a tunnel—"

"Horse-dirt," Blueclaw spat. "We don't have anyone of that name."

"I was with Wolfgang. He had asked the captive about one of his friends on your side dying. And spoke to Heavyclaw about his old mate."

The hairs on the back of Blueclaw's neck seized up, and calmed just as quick. It exposed the black flesh on her back and shoulders. She glanced to her sides, then over Blackleaf to spot the distance of the Shadow warriors.

"Well, well," she said. "You might be more interesting than before. Telling your sworn enemy of your whereabouts."

"I really did," the medicine cat said.

"Oh, I-I believe you now. Heavyclaw spoke of it last night. It truly is a shame what happened to her. Wolfgang really did love her."

"So, then, you *do* still have friends in UnderClan."

Blueclaw sighed, turning towards the distant Covenant territory. She kept her eyes on them for a bit, letting a sudden gust of wind ruffle her fur. Blackleaf watched the wrinkled, black skin under her fur reveal itself again. A glance from the old she-cat did not dissuade her, and she cleared her throat to get her attention.

"I might as well sh-share what I think of this mess," Blueclaw said, keeping her voice low. "We may never see each other again."

Blackleaf leaned close.

"The Axin Mess was far worse than any of them with you would ever say. I am surprised you even know of Shortfang. I watched my leader run away, my littermate die, and my clan fall. The gall of Littlestar to surrender the territory and run off to die. I will never forgive her for that. And curse Fleetheart for indulging her, staying to watch! StarClan disappeared during the Great Sky War. Littlestar's birth, that LeafClan prophecy, twoleg power, who cares what made them go. Panzer was one of the smartest cats to ever live, and she never lost her faith. But she knew when it was time to fight in the name of something else."

The medicine cat recoiled back, but Blueclaw approached, crossing the border a bit.

"Not-Not easy to hear is it, little one?"

Blackleaf shook her head.

"No insults? No hiss? I-I am over the line, and it is just a 'no'?"

She stayed still, waiting for Blueclaw to slide back to her side.

"What about Heavyclaw?" Blackleaf said. "Christa, and Wolfgang? Isn't there someone you live for?"

Blueclaw hissed. "Yellowstar, Littlestar, Horseleaf, all turned their backs to themselves. I just live."

The old cat turned tail and away, UnderClan warriors quickly taking positions near her before being hissed back to a distance. Blackleaf looked as close as she could at her fur. Not one bit of it was on end, or out of place. She was perfectly calm as she left. She even walked through her limp, almost managing to hide it. It sent a shiver down her back as she watched the warriors keep their distance from her. When she lost clear vision, Blackleaf also turned away, quickly being surrounded by her own warriors. Leaftail was prominent among them. She stared at his tail; he whisked it upwards, pointing the tips straight down. Blackleaf shook her head, shaking away loose snow and pushing her vest closer to her

shoulders. He repeated the action, making sure the others were occupied with guarding them before looking at her. She growled, lowering her head and flattening her ears. Leaftail's face relaxed and his tail sagged. He leapt to the front of his patrol and swung his tail forward. They all glanced back at the medicine cat and started padding further ahead to return to their positions at both edges of the bridge.

Blackleaf had already lost sight of her littermate. She ran to the end of the bridge, stopping under the shade of a beam. Her ears twitched at the sound her claws made, retracting them. She spotted Leaftail, descending to the underside of the bridge. Spotting the shaking paw she reached out, she held her words and made her way back towards camp.

Chapter 25

"We're almost there. Careful not to slip."

The gray and white she-cat adjusted the strap that crossed her chest, tightening the vest further. The deep brown hide stretched across her side, the bags covering the scars along her sides. She was careful to keep the snowfall from piling up, shaking it loose more often than the others – much to her companion's ire.

"Did you have to bring those with you?" Blackleaf let herself fall further behind the older medicine cat.

"I thought you would need a break from yours," Fleetheart whispered. "It rubs against you more than mine, and I wouldn't want you to get a blister."

"A real break would be me still sleeping," Blackleaf yawned. "I was already up during the day to meet at the bridge."

"Sorry." The bouncy, white fur of Angelika rubbed against her.

"Your tail is dragging again." The voice of the she-kit apprentice made Blackleaf shake her head. She glanced back to make sure the others were still with her.

"Oh, right!" Angelika lifted her tail high, her fur blocking the apprentice's view.

The sun and moon were blocked by the dense gray that spanned the sky, diffusing the evening light enough to prevent her from seeing any shadows, but just too bright for any twoleg lights to click on. Against the snow, everything was in clear view. The twoleg nest that bordered the silverpath they had crossed was tall, but not as big as the ones they approached. They stood in rows of two, no damage and no collapsed roofs, taller than the structures that made up their camp. One of the apprentices almost slipped staring up at the one they walked next to, drawing a scornful glance from the

she-cat apprentice. Blackleaf looked back just in time to smirk. To the left of one was a sharp but shallow drop, bordering the wide river bank. The gray-stone path alongside it narrowed, just wide enough for a single twoleg to pass. Splitting into pairs, the group walked against the wall slowly, the snow barely covering the path. The river's dull path ahead, widening once it passed under the bridge, was lit by twoleg lights and the glow from distant structures. None lingered on the view long; the weather blurred too much of it.

"Well, there it is," Fleetheart said.

The group stopped on a narrow part of the path, the rest of the way forward in tatters. A ramp was left from where a small nest behind the structures had long slid from its spot and came to rest in the coarse bank of the river. From the bridge it looked inconspicuous, but in the open it was the only thing to focus on. The color the twolegs had painted it had long faded, leaving deep scorch marks and exposing holes drilled deep in its façade. The walls remained anyway, holding the weight of the roof and splitting only once down the center and clasping the tail of a sky-monster. The path to it, a set of stairs leading to the bank's elevation, was clear of ice. Fleetheart made her way down, followed by the others. The apprentices did not take their eyes from the sky-monster's tail.

"How did it get there?" one of them asked.

"It crashed, idiot," the she-cat apprentice snapped.

"Actually, it was already there," Fleetheart said. "Sometimes, the *achse* twolegs put monsters in strange places to trick the enemy sky-monsters. Somehow, it's still here."

Blackleaf snapped her jaw at the she-cat apprentice; she was not looking. Fleetheart reached the bottom of the stairs and continued to the river's bank. It was raised above the ice-covered water with a gray-stone border. It was much higher than the ones near their camp, but just short enough for a cat to jump to and from the ice chunks.

"Have any of you ever been inside?" Fleetheart said.

The apprentices shook their heads, some of them timidly.

"What about you, Angelika?"

She shook her head. "Strays stay away from clan cat property. I've never been this close."

"The sacred spots are not clan property," Fleetheart said. "Anyone can use them."

"But clan cats get priority," the she-cat apprentice said.

The other apprentices made way for her to stride past. She was glaring at Blackleaf before running into one of Fleetheart's bags. She quickly scrambled back.

"First, I want to tell you something about the clan's past," she said. "It will help you understand why this spot is significant."

"Then why doesn't anyone ever visit?" the she-cat apprentice said.

Blackleaf glared at her.

"What? I'm not wrong. No one ever comes to this place."

"They do," Fleetheart said. "Well, they used to. You just won't hear an answer from your clan-born clanmates."

The apprentices gathered around. Angelika joined them; they did not make room for her, so she sat behind them. Blackleaf kept her distance, but looked at the older medicine cat.

Fleetheart cleared her throat, keeping her eyes on the nests above them. "I wasn't here for everything, but I was here when this clan had no leader. It was a group in charge. If anything happened to one, vital information wouldn't be lost. None had gone through the leader's ceremony, and none had the blessing of StarClan. Just one life and no past wisdom. They were all killed during the war."

"Is that why we never hear about a leader before Solestar?" one of the apprentices said.

"They don't like talking about it," Fleetheart said. "It is as painful for them as the Axin Mess is for me. Many were starving. The Great Sky War was relentless with lightning strikes and fire, shouting, destruction. But one night, a flat sea-monster crashed on shore. The twolegs never came to get it. When we finally pried the wood boxes open, they were full of frozen soles. Luckily it was leafbare, and we could preserve enough. Solestar was an apprentice then."

"They changed her name?" the she-cat apprentice asked.

"More like she didn't have a proper name before."

Blackleaf's tail curled between her legs; Angelika noticed.

"At some point, she was allowed to lead with the others," Fleetheart continued. "One by one, they were killed by sky-monsters and thundersticks or fighting with 'the other side of the river', leaving her as the last remaining leader. She organized them into a proper clan, with a proper name."

"Why the Clan of False Shadows?" another asked.

"It was just to intimidate the other side. She wanted the true shadow to be the smoke from the fires the sky-monsters caused."

Angelika slid her tail towards Blackleaf's, noticing her shaking paws. The medicine cat smacked it away and dropped her ears. The apprentices were too distracted to notice, eager to hear more. Fleetheart cleared her throat but said nothing, keeping her eyes on the space behind them.

"Wait, that's it?" the she-cat apprentice said.

Fleetheart nodded. "The rest is collectively scattered among the remaining survivors of the Great Sky War, minus anyone who wasn't born here."

"Then why didn't they tell us?"

"Many of the survivors prefer to forget the time when they were on the verge of defeat and starvation. I came from a clan where we never forgot our past... and I don't want any of you to forget yours."

Fleetheart looked at the sacred spot. "Before it slid down here, that nest gave refuge to many animals during the twolegplace's destruction. Even if the older clan-born would rather ignore the past, you shouldn't."

She motioned her tail towards it. Eventually, the she-cat apprentice stood and passed her, taking another glance at Blackleaf. Her ears fell when she saw her head down. The other apprentices stood and followed behind her, wading through the deepening snow.

"Careful getting to it," Fleetheart said. "The holes in this part of the bank are covered."

"You aren't coming with us?" the she-cat apprentice said.

"It's better if you learn of its significance on your own. Stay as long as you want."

The group padded away, bouncing slowly through the snow and leaving the three older ones on the bank. Fleetheart stood, stretching her legs and clearing her throat before walking towards the river. Angelika only followed when Blackleaf did, watching her tail angrily flick about. Fleetheart moved to the edge of the river bank, staring over the ledge for a bit before walking along it. The other two followed by her side, slowly padding towards the lone nest and watching the apprentices fumble their way inside. Angelika nudged Blackleaf again, but was angrily shoved away. Fleetheart shook her head.

"Once the twoleg lights flicker on, I'll go back," Fleetheart said, slowing her pace even more. "I don't see very well at night anymore."

"Is that why I'm here?" Blackleaf said, yawning.

"Actually, it was Angelika's idea."

Blackleaf turned to her right, the larger cat's happiness vanish against her glare.

"I, um..."

"Couldn't this wait until night?" Blackleaf growled.

"I'm sorry, I... well—"

"It isn't an easy topic to start," Fleetheart whispered. "She's not the only one worried for you."

"About what?"

"About the expressions you make," Angelika said, leaning close. "The others are whispering about you now. They're saying you're 'getting cozy' with Wolfgang, and that you hate the clan's apprentices."

Blackleaf kept her narrowed eyes forward.

"They think you value the captive's lives more than theirs. And that Solestar will do something about it, eventually."

She dropped her head.

"Is... I know this isn't true," Angelika said. "You said it yourself. Everything you're doing is for the clan—"

"I didn't say the clan," Blackleaf snapped. She glanced around, leaning close. "I said for my comrades. Everything I'm doing is for my comrades, not the clan."

"Isn't the clan our comrades?" Angelika said.

Fleetheart stopped and looked over the ledge. Her muzzle twitched a little, but her breathing slowed. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. Blackleaf stopped and looked over the ledge, too. The white of the ice was darkened by the dimming light. She tried looking at the water gurgling between the chunks.

"What are you fighting for, right now?" Fleetheart asked.

"StarClan. You know that," Blackleaf said.

Fleetheart sighed. "Leaftail was the one who told me to do this."

The young cat's ears perked up.

"He said he was concerned for you, and wanted to tell me first—"

"That snake..." Blackleaf said.

"I know you don't mean that," Angelika said. "Just—"

"What do you know of me!?" Blackleaf hissed.

"Fleetheart, was this a mistake?" Angelika mewed.

"No..."

Walking away from the pair, Fleetheart shook her head and cleared her throat. Blackleaf's ears briefly poked up. she lifted her tired eyes from the river and watched the older medicine cat shift the weight of her vest towards her back.

"Fleetheart," Blackleaf mewed.

She turned around.

"You haven't given up on me, have you?"

"Neither of us have."

She sighed, ears level and muzzle relaxed.

"Do you know why I haven't given up on you?"

Blackleaf tensed up.

"It's because I see a better version of me, and Littlestar, in you. One without the damage of the Axin Mess or the Great Sky War... When I arrived here near the end of the war, I was broken. I was carried in by Flyfoot. My fur was matted for many moons. Wolfgang force-fed me. I woke others when I hissed in my sleep. I tended to cat's wounds without a care for them. Because Littlestar and AchseClan were still on my mind. I wanted to join her so bad... some nights I wished the sky-monsters would just strike me down, so I could go without the guilt of doing it myself."

The young cat's eyes were frozen.

"I never like calling her Littlestar. I always think of her as Littlescent. The same smart, calm little cat who was like a littermate to me. And how disappointed she would be if she ever saw me like that. I can't believe in her, or myself, anymore. But I can believe in you... whatever it is you decide to do next. I'll let Flyfoot speak for herself."

Blackleaf took a few steps towards Fleetheart, but stopped. Angelika nuzzled her forward, but she stayed put. A slight breeze flowed past the three, Fleetheart shaking her fur and letting it pass through the gaps in her vest. She closed her eyes and embraced it for a moment before letting it go, walking in the direction of the silverpath. Blackleaf's chest thumped wildly watching the older medicine cat. It only stopped when she forced her eyes and ears onto the river below, taking in the churn of the water and the droll of the wind. A chill ran across her back; she shivered and let her tail drop. Angelika stood close, pressing against Blackleaf.

"Is, um..."

The medicine cat looked at Angelika.

"Are you going to be okay?"

Blackleaf sighed, looking back at the icy water, glancing a bit at the sacred spot.

"What would you think of me if I betrayed the clan, to help my comrades?"

Angelika seized up, but kept herself close.

"Because, at this point, I have no idea how to be what they deserve. What I was told I would be for them."

"I'd like to know why, though."

Blackleaf growled.

"No. Why can't Blackleaf the medicine cat be enough?"

"I've never been enough." Blackleaf slid herself away from Angelika. "Not for them, and not for her."

She shook her fur, head to tail. Brushing the blown parts flat, she walked towards the sacred spot. Angelika watched her put distance between them, her head dropping low. She turned to where the medicine cat was standing; the paw prints were already covered by the falling snow.

Chapter 26

The heavy snowfall blinded her, and the wind threatened to trip her again. But she pressed through, her medicine vest full and wrapped tight against her chest and belly. She barely left space to breathe, but the vest stayed in place against the torrent she endured. She pushed on until she saw the support beams of the bridge, ensuring she was the leftmost she could be when she did. The ones above her were barely visible amidst the gray and snow, as was the sun and the sky. She spotted the blobbed shapes that made up her comrades, all running past her and disappearing downward. A tom bumped into her bags and stopped.

"I heard there were injuries," Blackleaf yelled. "What happened?"

"It's worse now," the tom said. "They rushed the underside in scores. Badger-hearted under cats are dragging us over the sides with them!"

He sprinted away and carefully followed others down stairs leading under the bridge. Blackleaf watched several others walk down them, their pace slowing immediately on descending. Her ears swiveled towards them; the echoing cries of her comrades floated past her. She allowed several more to pass her before treading towards the stairs. Looking down them, she spotted one of the massive gray-stone supports that held the bridge above the river. it spanned the whole width, blocking her view of the other bank. One paw on the frigid stairs nearly made her slip. Her claws shot out to let her descend. The ice pulsed throughout her body, but she kept going. When she reached the bottom, the snow no longer fell on her.

The underside was entirely made of silverwood with tiny, evenly-perforated holes that let in the wind and kept her cold, the flaking gray paint blending it all with the gray-stone supports. The paths spanning the length and width of the bridge were wide enough for a pair of twolegs. Thin silvertubes acted as ledges much too tall to protect anything shorter. The single path spanning in the center had

a couple of wide areas, but stayed consistently narrow throughout the length of the bridge. There was no room to jump, maneuver, or make mistakes. But it did not stop the flurry of hisses and fur from nipping and clawing each other ahead of her. Right being the only direction, Blackleaf turned towards the center path, almost slipping from its corner. She struggled to slow her pace amidst the cries from the fighting, but made her way to one of the wider sections in the middle. Several of her comrades were laid down behind an ever-growing wall of them on the narrow path. Large wind gusts forced her to look away occasionally, only catching glimpses of the fighting. One of them let her see the river below; she closed her eyes and tried slowing her pounding heart. But she watched one of her falling comrades scream with its last breath before breaking against the icy bank and sliding into the river. struggling to look ahead, she reared up on another. UnderClan's line was facing off against her comrades, standing six wide against their five wide. They took swipes and shoved against the enemy's line, occasionally pushing one over the edge. The mass behind them continued hissing and beating against the path; she could feel the shakes from her spot. Some grappled others, rolling dangerously close to the unguarded edges.

One of her comrades approached, freshly clawed across her face. Blackleaf opened one of her pouches, but was stopped.

"I'm fine." She was fighting her crossed eyes. "Help Leaftail."

The warrior pushed past Blackleaf and ran towards the stairs. Along the way she stumbled, her tail dragging. She fell against the corner bar that held the platforms in place. She slipped over the side, no movements or sound as she slid down one of the gray-stone pillars and atop the river's ice. Blackleaf looked on through the platform's holes as the ice block carried her away.

"Over here!"

A voice snapped her from the scene. A tom waved her over, his paws covered in blood. He was huddled next to another. The long, tan fur almost unrecognizable against the fresh blood; the split tail made her heart skip. Stepping over the other wounded, she flung her bags open at the sight of her unconscious littermate.

"Don't let them closer!" Several of her comrades jumped over her to shore up their line, pushing and hissing against their approaching enemy. "Get the under cats off our side!"

She rolled him over; his other side was clear of blood, but his paws were soaked with it. Much of his bloodied fur had been sliced away, leaving his skin exposed to the wind. She was barely able to cover his shoulders, but she settled herself on top of him. She pushed the fur around to look for his injury.

"Help me move him!" She shouted.

One of the warriors left the line and pushed against his side. She nestled herself under her littermate best she could and lifted. His paws left red stains as they dragged behind him to the edge of the platform closest to the stairs. Stopping short of the right turn, she set him down and let a roll of fake-fur out of her bag. Her paws were shaking at the cries of her comrades. She unraveled it on the bite marks she found near his thigh. Blackleaf sheathed her claws and began licking away all the blood she could. But her eyes drifted up and to the fighting. The wind kept picking up, masking their hisses and insults every so often. Her comrades had merged into a giant mess, the ranks broken and UnderClan pushing forward. She watched several of them from both sides slip to the edges. One of theirs went over, her allies not quick enough to grab her. The Shadows took advantage and shoved forward, nearly knocking another off. Blackleaf released her muzzle, stained red, and slapped the fake-fur over the cleaner wound. She laid on them to add pressure while hastily wrapping them between his legs, occasionally ducking to let more of her comrades jump overhead to the fight.

Her heart pounded as she wrapped more layers.

"It's okay, It's okay." The fake-fur was quickly damp in blood. "It's okay, It's okay. I'm getting you out of—"

"Back defense!" a tom cried. "Down her quick!"

A lone she-cat leapt over the mass of her comrades and tumbled behind them. The formation was tackled by UnderClan's second wind, and none intercepted her. She ran to the end of the narrow

platform and onto the larger one, quickly spotting her target to her right. Her tabby coat was hardly recognizable with a thin layer of mud covering it. Her whole face was stained red, nearly hiding the scars.

"She's near Leaftail!"

Her comrades still struggled to spare anyone to catch her. The she-cat charged; Blackleaf dropped the wraps and hid behind Leaftail. She jumped over his body and landed behind them, a sharp pain wrenching her tail. Blackleaf wrapped it under her legs. She did not hiss, but bore her teeth and approached slowly.

"Windstripe," Blackleaf whispered.

A lone warrior leapt from the stairs to her position. She reared up and let him slam into her, rolling onto her back and pushing him over her head and off the platform. Blackleaf's fur shot up, her paws collapsing under her weight.

"Please," she mewed. "Please don't—"

Windstripe charged and snapped, barely missing Blackleaf's paw as she was dragged away.

"Wait, take her alive." Her trembling voice was lost in the wind.

One of her comrades dragged Windstripe towards the edge of the platform. He forced her down under his weight and missed her neck, clamping down on her shoulder. She rolled over and shoved him off. She raked his chin with her hind claws.

A wind gust tossed the fake-fur wraps from Leaftail and over the side. Blackleaf pressed her body against the wound, paws still shaking at the fight.

"Not like this!" she cried in vain. "You can escape. We can try again."

The tom crashed down on her. He forced her to her belly and bit her neck. Windstripe slammed her head against his jaw. She twisted her chest around and clamped down on his nose. He hissed and lost

his pin; she kicked him from the platform and watched him fail to pull himself up.

Another warrior leapt from the stairs onto her, sliding them towards Blackleaf. The two warriors traded blows pressed against her. Windstripe turned to and snapped at the medicine cat several times before giving up. A tom jumped over the pair and slammed into the fight, pushing them away. The tom clamped down on her neck. She hissed and flailed, flinging the tom from the platform screaming.

The other warrior cried out and bit Windstripe's neck. The she-cat hissed and kicked her away. The warrior recoiled, and Windstripe jabbed her belly several times. The Shadow cat's eyes faded in and out until they rested low. She stumbled to the edge of the platform. Another cat leapt down and grabbed her; Windstripe pushed both over the side.

The UnderClan warrior turned and jumped onto Blackleaf, wrapping her jaws around her neck. Her heart stopped when she felt the pressure; Windstripe's fangs were dull. The sharp ones left scratches as they were torn from her neck. Three Shadow warriors had pried her away from Blackleaf and pinned her.

"Stand down. Capture her!"

Blackleaf's voice was lost in the chaos. One of her comrades put all his weight on Windstripe's back. Another slammed her head into the platform while a third bit down on her neck. Her eyes shot open. She thrashed about and shook the one from her back. Arching her legs, she kicked him to the edge; the other warrior left her head to keep him from falling off. The third picked Windstripe up by the neck and started thrashing against her struggle.

"She's fallen! Retreat!"

The UnderClan line was pulling back. Blackleaf glanced in time to see one of theirs fall over the side. Her comrades were in pursuit, keeping their formation.

"Close..."

She focused back on Windstripe. Her mouth was limp and her head was bleeding. The two behind her were nowhere to be found; the third had an ugly scowl that made him bite even harder on the UnderClan warrior's neck. Blackleaf watched the life vanish from Windstripe's eyes, her long fur left drifting about in the wind. The Shadow warrior stood over her triumphant, grabbing her body in his jaws and dragging her towards the stairs. Her heart was pounding, not once taking her eyes from the it until it was out of sight. She felt warmth on her belly; Leaftail was still bleeding. Blackleaf quickly pressed more fake-fur against his wound. Then she felt the pain in her tail. She closed her eyes, drowning out the insults and hisses from the battle ahead of her. She focused on wrapping the fake-fur around her littermate's legs, weaving it in and between and tightening it. Lifting him on her shoulders, she refused the help of another and sighed when she felt a heartbeat. She only made her way to the stairs when she was sure UnderClan was retreating. She walked around the imprint Windstripe's body left; she started shaking the longer she fixed on it.

Chapter 27

She almost collapsed under her exhausted legs. The vest was draped over her back loosely, the bags flipped open and emptied. She dragged herself towards the bank of the river, lit poorly by the overcast diffusing the evening light. The twoleg lights flicked on earlier than they normally did, giving her enough to see the way. The wall of snow that blocked the river from view had not been marked. She sighed, walking towards the small, gray-stone wall that broke up the white. She scratched the fake-fur wraps around her neck. The water that flowed slower through it than the rest of the river had risen, spilling away from the wall and making a new pool in the snow outside of it. Before walking in, she glanced left and right; she recognized Wolfgang. He was dipping his paws in the melted slush a tree-length away. Ignoring the few others spaced about, she entered the inlet in the wall and let her vest slide from her shoulders. She stepped out of the supports and kicked the whole of it into the pool. It floated for a while before sinking the shallow depth to the bottom, protected by gray-stone from being swept into the current. She pushed her paws down on it, the squelching of blood from the bags made her ears twitch. Her nose curled until she saw the first bits of red drain back into the river. The footsteps of an approaching group swiveled her ears back.

"How is it in there?" The older tom's voice was low.

Blackleaf sighed. "Are you asking about someone?"

The varied group with him glanced around, ears flattening. After their silence, Blackleaf faced them.

"Anyone in particular?" she said, more force behind her voice.

"Her name is Myosotail," the tom mewed. "She-She's about my age. My mate. Please—"

"Did you ask the others in the medicine den?"

"Fleetheart and Flyfoot are too *busy* for that," a different tom said.

Blackleaf glared at him.

"Please, is my mate okay?" the older tom asked. "She was on patrol at the bridge, under Leaftail. I-I haven't seen her since. She never returned to the warrior's den. She never..."

The others comforted him to help calm his breathing.

"I'm not familiar with her name," Blackleaf said. "Is there anything else you can give me?"

The group let their older comrade approach and compose himself.

"She-She's big. Strong, with black fur and large, white patches on her sides—"

"Oh," Blackleaf said.

"Oh?" the tom stepped closer.

"She's... dead."

"What!?"

"I believe she... died of her injuries. The fur on her belly was thin, and an under cat managed to rake her multiple—"

"No, no, no, Myosotail why you!?"

The tom shouted her name several more times before collapsing in the snow. A pair from the group lifted him – he dragged his paws through the snow as they helped him back up the bank. Wolfgang looked away, the new snowfall taking his attention. The rest of the group was uninterested, putting theirs towards the medicine cat.

"What's wrong with you?" one of them said.

Blackleaf growled; a few of them stepped back.

"No," he said, holding his ground. "What's *wrong with you*!?"

"What? Is telling the truth wrong now?" Blackleaf said.

"You didn't sound like you cared."

"I spent the day watching dozens die of their injuries. And keeping them separated from the ones dead of blackcough. Don't push me."

"Seem to have been doing a lot of *watching* recently..." the tom grumbled.

Blackleaf stomped up to him and growled. He looked down on her, puffing out his chest. The medicine cat's eyes went wide; she smacked the tom across the muzzle and kicked snow in his face. The others growled and encircled her; Wolfgang looked on.

"Don't any of you see?" Blackleaf hissed. "I'm trying to help you!"

"Then what was that for?" the tom said.

"You think I'm just watching!? You mouse-hearted idiot."

"Then tell me what it is. Tell me what helping is."

"I've spent the past quarter-moon trying to make sense of our standing with StarClan."

The warriors glanced at each other, most with scowls on their faces. They reconvened in front of her, their fur flattening. All except for the tom rubbing his face.

"That's your excuse?" one of the she-cats said.

"Excuse me? StarClan is important."

"To who?"

Blackleaf's fur spiked. The rest of the group took a few steps back.

"No, this needs to be said. Keeping silent won't do us any good this time," the she-cat said.

"How dare you mock our faith like that," Blackleaf growled.

"Look around you! Where do you see an eager body of worshippers? Where, Blackleaf?"

The medicine cat kept her eyes firm on the tom.

"Because all I see are cats more scared of that odd-eyed kitten in the Covenant than they are of StarClan. For all we know, they are on *her* side instead of ours!"

"StarClan doesn't take sides," Blackleaf said.

"Yet we're taught the Star Covenant is a band of heretics," the tom said. "That their branches all around the earth have done nothing but kill under falsehoods and blasphemous history. And you tell us their stories. You tell us that the Stars take no sides and that they watch over every clan. And they just *watch* UnderClan kill us. They just *watch* heretics spread disease amidst our ranks."

"Rye does not make anyone sick," Blackleaf growled. "She's just a kit with odd eyes. Her powers aren't real."

"And she has a quarter a clan's worth of elite warriors guarding her," the tom growled. "And cats from far and wide coming to do her bidding. If anything, they're the religious ones."

"UnderClan is a silverpelt clan," the she-cat said. "Yet they ignore the warrior code. They've never followed it, if you ask our oldest comrades. Medicine cats told us they always would, that to break it angers StarClan. How to you explain that?"

"No one is speaking to the Stars right now," Blackleaf said. "No one has guidance."

The she-cat leaned in close. "You just told a tom that his mate was dead. You didn't even care. Not about him, or her, or anyone in that medicine den. You only care about yourself, and your Stars."

Blackleaf shoved the she-cat away. The group rallied behind the tom and she-cat, growling and yipping. They had Wolfgang's full attention. Once they stopped, they followed the medicine cat towards the gray-stone wall. She kept her eyes on her medicine bags, slowly kneading them.

"What? No response?" the she-cat said. "I know the stories about you. You've injured comrades for saying less. You know I'm right, do you?"

"How about we calm down a bit."

Wolfgang stood between Blackleaf and the warriors. They did not flinch from him at all, even as he growled down at all of them. The medicine cat looked over the older tom; no fresh scars. The clouds grew even heavier, blocking more light and loosing more snow. It muffled the sounds of the camp above the bank and left them with their tired breathing and shuffling. The she-cat closed her eyes and took a deep breath; the rest of the ground seemed to calm with her.

"What's the problem here?" Wolfgang growled.

"You have ears," the tom muttered.

"Hard of hearing, so how about you say it again."

The she-cat stepped forward. "You have to understand how frustrating it is for us."

"I'm trying to help with that," Blackleaf said, standing next to Wolfgang. "You have to believe me."

"Now you're begging?" the she-cat growled. "Today, Leaftail was almost killed. One of my friends lost his mate. Warriors I was raised with were dragged off the bridge by under cats. And the snowstorms are coming back... And the so-called champion of the Shadows that Solestar practically raised has shown her true colors. The only good that came from this day was that Windstripe will no longer trouble us—"

"I ordered those warriors to spare her," Blackleaf hissed.

"For what? So we would have another silent mouth to force-feed? Solestar will have them executed soon enough. After all the food and water we poured into them, it ends like that... I heard about you saying that. Why would you even want her alive? She's responsible for more deaths on that bridge than anyone."

"Just..." Blackleaf lost her words.

"Blackleaf, you're making it hard for any of us to trust you. You kill our morale when we feel invincible. You humiliate apprentices for being ambitious. You belittle Leaftail – your own littermate – who many of us respect. You've spent more time avoiding us than you have helping us with blackcough or the war."

"More time keeping secrets with the enemy or rubbing up against *him*." The tom pointed at Wolfgang.

"Watch your mouth," Wolfgang barked.

"You weren't there. You're never there. You don't deserve to tell me what to say."

The older tom flexed his clawless paws, baring his fangs.

"Nothing to say. Either of you," the she-cat said. "What was Solestar thinking with you?"

She hissed at Blackleaf before leaving. The rest of the group followed. A couple of them had wide eyes, their ears folded back. But the rest held their tails high and their chests out, each taking a narrowed scowl at the medicine cat before heading up the bank. Wolfgang hissed at them, shaking the loose snow from his fur. The twoleg lights brightened and started buzzing; they briefly took Wolfgang's attention. Blackleaf headed back to the gray-stone wall and dragged her medicine vest from the river. She pressed the water out of it, ignoring its icy sting. What little blood remained in the hide drained off the stone and was hidden by the fresh snowfall. She watched it all, every bit of it being either hidden or drained away. Wolfgang was staring over her shoulder, keeping his distance. Blackleaf's head was down; she was closely inspecting the medicine vest.

"Do you have anything to add?"

Wolfgang stayed quiet.

"Then I should get these somewhere to dry."

She slung the vest over her back, shuttering to its touch. Blackleaf walked past Wolfgang without a glance. But he caught a glimpse of her eyes; They were tense and narrowed.

Chapter 28

There was a chill along the stone floors that covered the massive tunnel. The twoleg mechanisms and lights were more active than usual, flicking on and off and growling from inside the walls. The whistles of the wind from the vents above blocked out the noise from the medicine den behind her. She sniffed the thin-tar stains on the ground; they were buried amidst all the scents that came from the surface. She tapped her claws along it, no sound. She was careful when she lifted her head not to brush her cheek against her shoulder. She kept her long neck as far from her chest as she could. She even kept her legs from brushing against each other. The fur on her back was pressed flat; she did not even shake it. She took a deep breath before turning into the first den to her right, the familiar pile of fake-fur blankets still there. The twoleg light in the room was flickering on, but stayed out most of the night. The rattling from the vent near the den's entrance kept her presence a secret. But the blankets shifted about when she walked to the center of the den. The fickle light only gave Blackleaf glances of the older she-cat.

"I..."

The False Shadow's voice trailed off. The medicine cat kept herself quiet, waiting.

"I have some final words I'd like to get to my clanmates... please."

"What were you told?" Blackleaf's ears fell.

"Fleetheart told me that... Solestar was thinking of having me executed. If that's the case, I need you to tell my clanmates something. Windstripe will listen if you say it's from me."

"Windstripe is dead," Blackleaf mewed.

"Then what happened at the bridge yesterday was all true... Your littermate?"

"He won't give himself more than a quarter-moon before resuming his post."

"Then I guess this is the last time we'll have to speak."

Blackleaf shook her head.

"No, Blackleaf, it is." The False Shadow leaned into the blanket and coughed. "The blackcough isn't getting any better. After seeing what your clanmates who have it go through, the execution might be a mercy."

"You said not to talk like that," Blackleaf said.

"My death is certain. Yours is not. Besides, I've accepted that this is happening. I have regrets, and things to say. But it is my fault I can't say them. And the last thing I need is a guiltier conscious knowing that too much time around me might give you blackcough. Now, about those final words to my clanmates..."

"I'm getting you out of here."

The False Shadow gagged on something, coughing into the blanket again. Her soft eyes cautiously landed on Blackleaf. She was straight, her ears swiveling about and twitching at any noise.

"You'd risk your clanmates' trust for this?" the False Shadow said. "Because I will *not* let you take any action that will get you banished, or worse."

Blackleaf nodded. "I kept away from you, like you asked. But I see my comrades dying of blackcough now. I know how long you could last, and being starved and beaten for over a moon prior couldn't have helped. I can't let you die without any answers."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. About StarClan."

The False Shadow's ears perked up.

"We can get answers together."

"Your clan's patrols. You must have warriors walking around since we were caught. Right?"

"We can avoid them." Blackleaf peeked out the side of the den. "I've spent all day watching our sacred spot. Only the Axin Mess survivors ever go there. Leaftail can't follow me with his injuries. The patrols around the big twoleg nests were moved to the bridge in case of another surprise attack. And the wind is blowing north, so they won't scent us when we travel from here to the river. There are stairs at the end of this tunnel that lead straight up, and the way was uncovered by the twolegs when they brought the snake-monster. We can make it and, when we do, you can leave."

Her ears slowly fell, her expression softening.

"There's a thick sheet of ice that got stuck between the banks," Blackleaf whispered. "You would only have to make a small jump to get back to your side. I'm sure you can make it."

"It's not about my escape..." the False Shadow curled deeper into her blanket.

"Hey, I decided this on my own. I'm doing this as a medicine cat."

"Is it worth so much?"

Blackleaf retracted her claws and sighed. "I didn't think so this morning. But I'm seeing how my comrades are acting, how they're thinking. Their opinions of me are... I just want answers. I can't let my life be in vain because I was scared at what searching for answers looks like. And I have no one else to turn to."

The False Shadow yawned, stretching her forelegs and twitching her ears.

"Life is never in vain, Blackleaf."

She pushed the blanket from her shoulders; the smell she gave off curled Blackleaf's nose and forced her claws out. Her ribs were still showing, and the bald patches around her flank extended to the start of her tail and her hind paws. She hobbled when she tried to stand up the first time. Blackleaf peeked out of the den, waiting for

a while with her ears facing towards the medicine den's back entrance. When the twoleg mechanisms started rumbling, she left the den and waved the False Shadow out. She kept her distance.

"I'm not certain what this will give me, but it beats just waiting to die," the older she-cat whispered.

In the light and out of her den, the False Shadow was nearly unrecognizable. Her long fur had several thin patches on it. The skin around her belly was pulled tight; Blackleaf cringed at how much it stretched with each slow step she took forward. Her eyes were strained but straight, bloodshot and puffy. Her claws tapped instead of scratched, dull from kneading and whittling on stone. The scent alone was enough to make the medicine cat's eyes water, but she took a step closer each time she saw the False Shadow stagger or slow. Blackleaf tried to focus on something else. They reached the large silverwood panels that blocked off the tunnel's monster entrance. The twoleg markings on them were unrecognizable against the scorch marks all over. Piles of ice-hard earth had found their way through every hole and blocked the entrance from both sides. But the spiral stairs to the right of it were fine. The False Shadow sat and took deep breaths. Blackleaf had enough and approached her.

"What are you—"

Blackleaf pushed herself under the tall cat's legs and propped up her chest.

"You won't make it up the stairs," Blackleaf whispered. "Let alone through the snow. The wind is pretty tough, and I won't let you die out there."

The False Shadow tried to resist, but stopped when she realized she could not overpower the medicine cat. She carefully pressed her back against the sick cat, avoiding pressure on her belly and waiting for her thighs to relax.

"You can leave here with your dignity," Blackleaf whispered, "not having to fumble through the snow or fall down these stairs. You're tall enough to walk with me, as long as you keep yourself on my

back."

She purred as the False Shadow began to move her legs forward, somewhat mimicking her own. Blackleaf struggled from the weight, but kept her balance. Her racing heart carried her through the strain. The False Shadow groaned, pressing her head against Blackleaf's neck. The sick cat's breath sent shivers throughout her body; it reeked of bile and was much cooler than it should have been. But she kept going, careful to keep the tapping of her claws to a minimum on the silverwood steps. Each step she took seemed easier than the last. She eventually found rhythm with the False Shadow, and the two walked almost a normal pace.

"I spent some time digging away the ice on the surface," Blackleaf said. "It should be nothing but snow. Once we poke through, it'll be pretty cold."

"You're a good medicine cat," the False Shadow whispered.

Blackleaf froze; the older cat purred, moving her head up.

"You..."

"I'm not sure how often you hear it from your clanmates, but thank you. No matter what happens when we're outside, you're a hero to me. I'm sorry I ever thought otherwise. And I would be proud to have you as a clanmate. Or even as kin."

Blackleaf felt her heart racing, making no attempts to calm it. Energy surged throughout her body, her legs no longer buckling under the weight. She looked at the thin layer of snow at the top of the stairs and nodded, keeping her head high.

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The weather had already taken a turn. The wind pressed the snowfall against the pair's side. The moon was barely visible amidst the thinner parts of the gray sky. Twoleg lights hardly lit their path,

despite being brighter than ever before. The pair were crouched directly under one, the snake-monster path glistening behind them. They had already moved to the leftmost side of the structures, neatly aligned in rows of two. Their massive façades did not buckle in the slightest to the weather. They kept to the snow, keeping their claws off the gray-stone whenever they could. When they reached the side, Blackleaf lead the False Shadow to the narrow path that followed the length of the structure. She barely managed to spot the stairs and the sacred spot amidst the white pounding against them and the wall. Her eyes drifted towards the river; the ice was still. The lights on the other side did not come on, but the ones that lined the bank wall on their side did. The bridge was lit as well. Looking back, the pair saw several forms moving along the silverpath and towards the bridge.

"Are you concerned about your comrades?" Blackleaf said.

"I'd just... rather not think about fighting right now," the False Shadow said. "Besides, the snow is giving me a surge of energy. Maybe it's the fever."

"Then we should keep moving. I'll motion when I've found the stairs. It isn't safe for you to slide down."

Staying close to the wall, they padded as quickly as the False Shadow could. A pair of eyes glowed amidst a twoleg light far ahead. But they scattered the moment they noticed the two heading their way. Several sets of claws scratched as they fled, exposing their position in an alley between two nests.

"Why are they afraid?" the False Shadow said. "Ancestor clans accept strays."

"The recent fights at the bridge must have them on edge," Blackleaf said, glancing about the area. "And we're here at a time they aren't used to. We probably disturbed them trying to hunt."

Blackleaf aimed her nose to the air; she scented blood. Her ears fell as she looked past the bank to the bridge. Her ears tried to pick up any sounds, but they got nothing but wind and snow. She shook her fur and folded her ears back against her head. The structure was

unmoving, the tail of the sky-monster was still prominent despite the weather. The snow had piled against the wall facing the river. She could not see the massive crevice that should have split it in two, nor the small holes or the scorch marks. Blackleaf stomped to her left; uneven ground. Pushing the snow away, she caught the raised lip of the stairs. They were completely covered by the sharp 'ramp' of snow that stretched along the raised path. She kicked a rock into it. It immediately sank.

"It'll be easier to slide down here," Blackleaf said. "The stairs are in front of where I'm standing. Go first. In case you get stuck—"

She turned around; the False Shadow was not there. Blackleaf ran her eyes and ears across the narrow path, then to her right and down the snow. A stray was staring at her from next to the river bank. She kept looking, making her way towards the sacred spot. She jumped down the bank and landed in the soft snow. Her paw throbbed and cracked when she sank. Scrambling to her paws, she ignored the pain and spotted a large lump of gray lying far in front of her. She winced each time she extended her leg padding through the snow. The trail left by where she stumbled down was quickly covered over. Blackleaf brushed the snow from her fur and slid herself her chest, hoisting the sick cat over her shoulder. She kept still for a moment and waited for a heartbeat. The pounding of her own drowned out any feeling from the other. The snow was thinner below the narrow path. She clawed her way through the weather and approached the large crack that split the sacred spot in two. Blackleaf rotated the False Shadow parallel to her body so they would fit through. She struggled to push her legs against the thick buildup, the injured one forcing her to pause. The sick cat mumbled something, shifting around. Blackleaf kicked forward more, putting both their weight on her injured leg. She growled and winced, but kicked through the block. A screech broke her focus, echoing from the direction of the bridge. It made her shiver, bouncing from the massive sheets of ice and never stopping even when it passed by. She only turned her ear to it and kept moving inside. Panting, she began navigating the piles of stone and broken walls that remained of the nest. The floor was stone in some parts and shattered in others, forcing her to slow down and stretch them both in certain parts. Even in the relative darkness of the inside, she knew exactly

where to step. Focusing on the final turn, she kicked down snow buildup that blocked the way and pushed into a larger den.

Light immediately flooded her vision, reflected from the center. She limped to the far wall ahead and carefully set the False Shadow down. Blackleaf pressed her ear against her chest, and sighed. She pushed the medicine cat away and stirred to consciousness.

"You scared me," Blackleaf said.

"So much for my dignity," the False Shadow mumbled. "I guess the blackcough took away my strength. Or what was left of it."

Blackleaf's ears dropped at her words. She turned and sat, facing the center. The False Shadow gathered the strength to slide herself nearby, lying down and taking deep, deliberate breaths.

"It's magnificent up close," she whispered. "So much more than the rumors and stories."

The chamber was mostly clear of snow, save the buildup near the corners and center. The floor was covered in small, brown plots and dying green weeds. Some managed to make their way up the crumbling walls, catching all the sunlight they could. The leaves from them were picked clean. The wind was kept at bay, and the air was still inside. The roof sprinkled snow lightly across the floor, the brown and weeds still overtaking it. The sky-monster in the center shined a brilliant silver, even with little moonlight. It was pointed almost straight up, nose in the dirt and tail extending out the hole in the ceiling. Two small wings were attached to both sides of it, of which the rare twoleg symbol that adorned Fleetheart's medicine vests was still clear. Blackleaf lingered on it; a black 'X' shape with lines jutting from each corner, each line facing clockwise. Most of the light started there and ended at the base of the monster. Two large wings caught the rest and were broken against the crack in the center of the nest. The spot where the twoleg operator would sit was nearly indistinguishable from the rubble surrounding it. And the single nose that powered it was obliterated and hidden beneath the dirt. Parts of its once-spiraled cone lay scattered around. The echoes of distant twoleg activity and the rush of the wind seemed to melt away. Their fur lay still and their bodies were warming.

Blackleaf sat herself closer to the False Shadow, resting against her side.

"I know Heidi would love to see this," the False Shadow said. "Either love or hate to see it... Even made of twoleg things, the Shadow's sacred site is amazing. It's lifted my spirits just being here."

Blackleaf flicked her tail, brushing against the False Shadow's several times. She looked over to see the medicine cat breathing quick and forcing her eyes center.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"I need you to clean a wound," Blackleaf mewed.

"All I see is—" The False Shadow paused when she saw the small, frozen drop of blood amidst the fur on her flank. "I'm just a warrior. I don't know what to do here."

"Warrior or not, any cat can lick a wound." Blackleaf's voice was breaking.

The False Shadow shook her head. "It was bad enough you carried me. Cleaning a wound, I'm certain, would transmit the blackcough. I'd have to—"

"I don't care. I just need it gone."

"Blackleaf, it's too risky—"

"Please! It's killing me."

"It's just a little scratch compared to—"

"If it isn't clean, I'll pass out. Please, just get rid of it!"

Blackleaf felt the frigid pressure of snow and dirt against the blood. Her flank quickly cooled, and her heart stopped pounding. The False Shadow brushed her tail to try and stop her shaking. Her head dipped, but she sighed and laid herself down next to the older cat, letting her head rest on the side of her belly.

"Is this what was bothering you a few days ago?" the False Shadow said. "Are you afraid of blood?"

She left her head against the ground and her focus on the sky-monster, taking in the quiet hum of the river just outside. The distant echoes of the twolegplace returned.

"Sort of," she said.

"I didn't clean it," the False Shadow said, sliding herself a tail-length away. "You've been too close for too long already. And it's just a scratch."

"As long as I can't see it, it's fine."

Blackleaf turned her head to the older cat, who was taking long, deep breaths. She rolled herself onto her back and stared at the clouds. They blocked her view of the stars, but left spaces for stray beams of moonlight to shine down and reflect off the sky-monster. Despite the echoes, the den was quiet enough for them to hear each other's subtle movements. They took it in for a few moments, taking in the cool air that kept fresh without a loud breeze.

"I... I should be saying this to Leaftail," Blackleaf said. "He's made such a big deal of me this past moon, ever since I became a medicine cat. He's my littermate, and he cares about what the clan thinks of me. But here I am with an UnderClan spy who won't even give me her real name."

The False Shadow cleared her throat. "Should I ask why you can't tell him whatever it is you're about to tell me?"

"I don't know. We didn't see eye-to-eye on StarClan's absence or importance. It drove us apart when we were growing up. Well, *I* kind of drove us apart. And all he ever wanted was answers. A way to understand, you know?"

"I do," the False Shadow said. "I was like that with my littermate when he became a medicine apprentice. Did he want answers to why it was so important to you?"

"I think so," Blackleaf said. "It started with a training accident. A

pretty bad one."

The medicine cat averted her eyes, focusing hard on the tail of the sky-monster. The False Shadow nodded.

"You only have to tell me what you're comfortable with," she said.

"That wouldn't be fair," Blackleaf said, looking at her. "You deserve to know why. Or what, at least... Shadow apprentices train deep in the backlands, far from camp and any older cats. Plenty of hiding places and varied terrain for mock battles. It was newleaf, raining. We trained with our claws out; to teach us control. Leaftail's group ambushed us. In the fight, one of them cut my paw deep, and it started bleeding. I panicked. He scared the others off and demanded one of them get help... I don't know what came over me. But when he tried to lick the blood away, I attacked. Bit his paw, scratched his neck. He tried running away, and I stomped on his tail. A twoleg object beneath the mud ran right through it. I went back to groveling once I was sure he was down. I was covered in mud, a cut on my paw... and I just put a hole in my littermate's tail. When help came, he got it instead of me."

"My Stars," the False Shadow whispered. "What triggered it?"

Blackleaf shook her head. "I'm still not completely sure. I wasn't very friendly, even as a kit. I got into fights long before my apprentice training. I just felt like I should not die there. I *could not* die there. And I felt like I was. The rain, the mud, it made the bleeding look so much worse than it really was. All that was racing through my mind were all the ways it could make me sick, or never heal properly. Like I deserved to think about that. You've seen my littermate's tail. It never healed. Fleetheart and my mother came to his aid. They thought *he* was the training accident, when really it was something I caused. Leaftail gave me a look when he was being carried off. It wasn't anger, or pain. His eyes were low, but strong towards me. He kept his muzzle relaxed, and his ears alert. It was almost like he was asking why. And, when I looked back, I had nothing for him but fear... He never told anyone what really happened. I believe Fleetheart figured it out, but I never asked if she did or not. Solestar moved me to medicine cat training under Flyfoot once she learned of it. She still had high hopes for me, and

said I was wiser than I was strong. She never asked what happened, or how Leaftail was injured, or why I was so upset. Solestar never made me confront it. So I never did."

Blackleaf waited for a response, turning her head to the sky-monster again. She went over the brown and silver outlining of where the twoleg would have sat, looking over all the dials and mechanisms inside, keeping her ears perked up. She heard rustling next to her; the False Shadow had sat up, but stayed her distance.

"I understand," she said. "I really do. That feeling of absolute certainty. Logic, perception, all of it just fades away for the feeling in your heart. Good or bad. Whatever or whoever put that feeling there doesn't matter... You've become important to me. I want to prove to you I understand."

Blackleaf looked into the sick cat's eyes, dark around the edges.

"I was born during the Great Sky War, long before Clementstar came and reorganized us into UnderClan. Our group's 'medicine cat' was killed by the sky-monsters, but she had already trained my littermate as an apprentice. I told you about how he rallied what remained of us into believers, despite never hearing from StarClan himself. One of those cats he rallied was me and... I trained under him as an apprentice, ending my time as a warrior."

"You...!" Blackleaf's eyes widened. "You're one of UnderClan's medicine cats?"

"I'm sorry I lied to you," the False Shadow said. "But everyone was tricked. I had already been seen in fights, but not him. I always left for our supply patrols, the Shadows none the wiser of my new role. But, with my death, UnderClan's future is certainly going to be bloody."

Blackleaf's ears folded back.

"Many moons went by. The twolegs rebuilt, the sky-monsters got faster and louder, and StarClan never contacted him. He began to lose faith, believing that the Great Sky War had taken them away from us somehow. His isolation, the self-loathing, the pressure he

put himself under. He believed he rallied our clan to a dead end, and when the clan-born slowly stopped believing he felt he had given them false hope. He was already in a bad place. Leftover fear from the thunder and lightning the sky-monsters attacked with. Nothing I could do helped him. I failed to help him. He never showed it around me, and I admired him more for it. But he couldn't hide it forever... One night, a few moons ago, I woke up and he just wasn't there. He had given up on his life, not finding one clue as to what happened to StarClan. For a while, I was angry with them, then him, then myself. When Clementstar decided to spy for possible underground invasion routes, I begged to go for a chance to get some answers. He was right to say no. So, I snuck away with the group. With the mud and dirt, no one knew it was me until we were already in your backlands. We came close to being caught a few times, mistaken as strays probably. The apprentices among us had never surfaced, and the warriors were all from the deep patrols. The Shadows would've never expected a whole group had infiltrated. But they caught us. Near a twoleg monument one of your Axin Mess survivors visits. At least that was not my fault. But everything else that is about to happen to UnderClan is."

Blackleaf waited for the False Shadow to catch her breath. Her tail was curled around her shaking paws.

"Clementstar just assumed that as long as cats were being treated, that someone was ready to take the role. But there were no apprentices. And Blueclaw has always refused to take an auxiliary role in it. We were so busy searching for the Stars, recovering from the war— no. No excuses. I did not heed the tale of the Axin Mess. I failed the clan. I failed my littermate. And, even in this beautiful place, I feel nothing. I will be dead in less than a moon, one way or another, and I have nothing to show for it. No way to restore our faith, or our ancestral wisdom. We even ignore the warrior code... The guilt is not worth it, Blackleaf. I gambled the future of my clan to get to this spot, and I only got a reminder of my selfishness. I let this pursuit come ahead of my clanmates. My littermate let it destroy him. So much has been lost for those accursed Stars. I don't want you to be lost, too. Promise me that you won't let this, or anyone else, consume you."

Blackleaf nodded, her heart pounding. The False Shadow coughed into her shoulder, sliding herself a bit further from the medicine cat.

"There's one more thing," the she said.

Blackleaf faced her.

"My name is Dovewhisker."

The young cat's ears perked up. She slid herself closer, the False Shadow unable to back away fast enough. Blackleaf could not help herself; she flung herself towards the sick cat and buried her head in her chest, wrapping her shaking paws around her shoulders. Dovewhisker resisted for just a moment, before letting Blackleaf stay.

"I can feel it in your chest," Dovewhisker said. "Your heart is strong, and you haven't given up. You really are a good medicine cat. The Great Sky War has deformed the hearts and minds of everyone who lived through it. *Everyone*, Blackleaf. It is just as much a disease as blackcough, and just as dangerous."

She gently slid Blackleaf from her shoulders, careful not to get her paws anywhere near her muzzle.

"Someone will have to notice I am gone, eventually. Let me spend my final free moments looking up at the Stars. Thinking about the clanmates I let down, and the answers I failed to find. I will pray for them, and all the wayward cats of the world who might feel just like us."

Dovewhisker sighed, laying her head on the floor and closing her eyes. Blackleaf sat up, listening to the sick cat and watching her chest jerk uncomfortably around. She looked up and closed her eyes.

Please tell me, she thought. *What is going on up there? Clan structure survived the Great Sky War, so where are you... Littlestar. Was it you who made me attack my littermate all those moons ago? Or was it me? Do you demand I survive, picking up where you left off? Did you give me*

this birth defect, give me Flyfoot and the others to guide me, Solestar to encourage me, or keep me isolated from my comrades with anger and... or is that all me? I keep them away. I make Solestar important to me. I am not you; I said it myself when I was with Wolfgang and Heavyclaw. But I feel like I am sharing your pain. The failure, the goal being so far out of reach. The fear of knowing what to do next, only able to look back at the damage you – both of us have caused. I am afraid of the damage I have caused, of losing my comrades' trust, and of dying without answers. But I shouldn't be afraid of making choices...

She felt her whole body begin to shiver, creeping up from her shaking paws. Her whiskers twitched every time she tried to work up the nerves to open her eyes. Blackleaf took deep breaths, her thoughts broken. She felt her claws creep back into her paws and her body fall still. She found her tail was intertwined with Dovewhisker's, slowly uncurling it and staring at the sick cat. Her breathing was shallow, but she was not asleep; Blackleaf kept herself quiet. Her fur made only subtle movements, and she could hardly see her ribs moving. But her face was relaxed. Her muscles did not shake, and her claws were retracted. Even her ears were still, amidst a crackling coming from the river. She nudged her paw a bit and held her breath, waiting for her to move. When she did, she sighed. The air around her seemed to grow colder the more she thought about where she was. The light around her dimmed; one of the holes in the clouds had covered. The brilliance in the sky-monster's silver disappeared along with it. She felt herself shaking a bit. Her ears fell, and she blocked out the second crack echoing from the river. Her head pressed against her chest, Blackleaf began to take deep breaths, forcing her eyes open and refusing to let her claws out. Dovewhisker's tail slid across her paw and rested there. Blackleaf looked down at it, her nerves easing. She reached out a paw to brush against it.

"Blackleaf?"

Her eyes darted to Dovewhisker's.

"Blackleaf."

Dovewhisker rose, stretching her back and turning around, keeping her tail against Blackleaf's paw.

"I think it's time," she whispered. "Is there anything else you wanted to say to me?"

Blackleaf felt her fur begin to crawl again. Dovewhisker kept brushing her paw against her, sliding it across her back as she stood.

"Blackleaf, turn around."

She recognized the voice, and turned to see Fleetheart standing in the new shadows of the den. The scents of unknown warriors had surrounded the sacred spot. Screeches and hisses in the distance perked her ears up.

"Feetheart," Blackleaf whispered. "Please. You don't have to tell anyone."

Fleetheart shook her head.

"Please!" she snapped. "She just wanted a chance. She's dying and condemned. I had to give her one."

"UnderClan had accepted her fate when they first saw her collapse," Fleetheart said. "They just attempted a rescue. Even if Shadows hadn't seen you get here, their warriors might have."

"The bridge was a ruse? They wanted our patrols occupied... but there's no way they could've known I would be here with her, on this night and at this spot."

Dovewhisker shook her head. "The apprentices might've remembered where I was kept. It was certainly a desperate rescue attempt. But, as their medicine—"

"No, wait—"

"It's alright, Blackleaf. Fleetheart already knew, I'm certain of it."

"I did," Fleetheart said. "Certain shades of brown and green were under her claws, and none of the other captive's. The kind that only comes from stamping around forests for a lifetime. There are none here, and the dirt is covered by snow. She would've been digging to

find roots and frozen plants for medicine substitutes."

"And Clementstar just exposed his knowledge of a crossing," Dovewhisker growled. "He shouldn't have, but what else would he have done? Medicine cats aren't supposed to be captured. Or run away."

"Our warriors have already broken it." Fleetheart's ears flattened. "There's no way out now."

"Why does she have to die?" Blackleaf growled.

Fleetheart shook her head.

"Answer me! She hasn't done anything wrong."

"Yes, I have."

Blackleaf stared at the sick cat.

"I *have* done wrong. I came here, got sick, put others in danger, and let my clanmates down. There is no way out of this. I don't want a way out."

She continued stroking Blackleaf's back.

"This isn't fair," Blackleaf mewed.

"I know," Fleetheart whispered. "I won't ask for her name, or her reasons for coming here. But I can't let her go. I'm sorry."

Dovewhisker nodded, sliding her paw from Blackleaf's back. The young medicine cat backed away as she shuffled towards Fleetheart. She looked back for a while, over the sky-monster and the snow beneath it. Neither shined anymore, but she kept her eyes on it as long as she could. Warriors came through the small crack and quickly took positions at all corners of the den. They glared at Blackleaf; one even hissed at her. Fleetheart and Dovewhisker left the den together, slowly to let the sick cat stay conscious. The warriors followed behind them and left as quick as they barged in. All but two, who stayed close to the young medicine cat. She hardly noticed the scratch under her fur; She pressed her tail against it.

Chapter 29

The water droplets along the rim of the entrance were frozen. Some of them had shaved off in the wind; she marched through them without a wince. The shock of the cold, gray-stone floor briefly took over her mind. She felt her heartbeat rise right when it was over, her ears flattening. A young guard tom was standing at the top of the stairs, watching her slowly ascend. He stepped aside enough to let her and the empty bags of her vest go by. He kept his tail low and his ears bent with his brow. Glancing behind her, she briefly caught him relaxed but still staring at her. She wasted no time crossing the balcony, not looking at the faded images along the wall or the collapsed entrances to the dens that ran alongside it. Her attention was solely on the open wood cover to her leader's den. She could already spot her leader, standing under the table instead of atop it. Her bobbed tail twitched with each scratch that her claws made, and her spots were sharper than the rest of her messy fur. Pushing the entrance closed made her wince even more, and she waited for her leader's command before sitting.

"Come here," Solestar growled.

Blackleaf dutifully walked under the table and faced her leader's back.

"Sit down. All the way down."

She rested her front legs on the floor and laying down. She let her vest sag from her shoulders a bit, arching her head up to keep view of her large leader. Solestar was frozen, twitching at any small movements Blackleaf made. She tried keeping herself still, but was disrupted again right when she would settle. Even her own claws made her jump. She took a deep breath, her ears and tail no longer skittish. Even the 'X'-shaped marks on her thighs were visible, scars pressing against the patterns of her fur. And she made sure the medicine cat was looking at them.

"I thought all night about what to do with you." Solestar's voice had

softened. "I still refuse to believe you are capable of betraying the clan somehow—"

"I'd never betray the—"

"Shut your *mouth*, Blackleaf!" Solestar hissed. "You knew! You knew exactly who you were helping. Carelessness like this goes back to the stories of ancient clans. But they were just stories to me. UnderClan knows she's dead. They might've successfully rescued her if we didn't have patrols near the sacred spot. And with the Covenant silent and the blackcough... Warriors are dying all around you, Blackleaf. Why did you have to do this *right now*?"

Solestar began pacing; Blackleaf let her chin thump against the floor. Each word stung. She started shaking, letting her tail wrap around the scratch on her flank. It stilled her for a moment, until the tapping of her leader's claws took her attention. Her ears twitched each time the wind scratched something against the clear-stone. She tried focusing on it, but her eyes never left her leader's bristling fur. Solestar was bent on keeping the medicine cat's attention while she figured out what to say. She constantly let it flare and calm, and Blackleaf watched it moved up and down.

"I rushed your promotion," Solestar said. "In less than a moon, you've managed to hurt your reputation even more and give intel to the enemy on their captives. And our clan is still far from the Stars. At least *that* doesn't seem to be a problem." She hung on those words. "When I asked you for advice five days ago, you told me to trust you. That you wouldn't fail me. You were supposed to avoid the mistakes of everything prior. Yet here we are. I should've never put you in medicine cat training."

"You didn't do anything for me," Blackleaf mumbled.

"What?"

"I won't be treated like some apprentice who ran from her post. Helping that medicine cat was the right thing to do. She wasn't our enemy."

Solestar leaned close. "Do you even know what you're saying

anymore!?"

"She was looking for answers," Blackleaf growled. "She just wanted to see the Stars return to clan life."

"Don't you *dare* growl at me! You don't get it, do you? We've lost any leverage we had. Now this is a war to attrition. And there are too many unknowns to fight that way. Do you not care about any of your comrades?"

"Don't drag them into this. You're the *dummkopf* that allowed them to forget."

"Twoleg-speak is not allowed in—"

"You're disrespecting what it means to be a medicine cat. She knew that. She reminded me of that. You never understood."

Solestar stepped back. "Where did you get the spine to talk to me like this?"

Blackleaf stood. "You aren't the same cat that helped raise me."

"Maybe you just didn't pay close enough attention to me."

"And you didn't see my drive, either. You never asked me why I keep others at a distance. Or why I connected with the UnderClan medicine cat... Solestar, do you even know who the kit you mentored was?"

Solestar sighed, keeping her distance and returning to her pacing. She waited for the wind scratching the clear-stone to die down, and glanced past Blackleaf out the crack in the den's entrance. The tom was still there.

"Do you know what Flyfoot said after she attacked you?" Solestar whispered. "She told me you were too young for your role. You were too stubborn and arrogant for your own good. I had to disagree. I didn't tell her this, but it was enough just to see you. Knowing – believing there was still a desire to help your comrades. Or to make me proud to lead this clan, and to be your teacher. Your health, your drive, it made me hopeful just to watch you... It's

disappointing all that knowledge of medicine and that defect of yours was used against your comrades more than for them. All just to wait for the night sky to talk to you. You aren't a bad medicine cat. Just a useless one."

Blackleaf smacked Solestar's nose and made her rear up. She leapt straight into her chest and knocked her on her back. She hit her as many times as she could, Solestar blocking them. When Blackleaf hissed, she kicked her off and puffed out her chest, heaving.

"I should've known," Blackleaf hissed. "When you hit me, when you questioned my judgement. I never had to face judgement around you. Were you ever *anything* like the leader who mentored me!?"

The den's entrance creaked open; the tom Blackleaf passed on her way in was standing behind her.

"Restrain her." Solestar's voice shook. "In full."

Blackleaf attacked again; the tom yanked her to the ground by her tail. She was pinned under his weight, the tom placing his forelegs in front of her vest's bags. She pushed against them, but his grip was firm. She stopped when the warmth of his mouth enveloped around her neck, his fangs threatening to close.

"What do you think you're doing?" Blackleaf hissed.

"*I* am his leader, not you," Solestar said. "He did what I told him."

Solestar circled the pair a few times, each pass lingering on the 'X' mark on both of their thighs. She looked at the tom's; displayed by his short fur. Blackleaf's were mostly covered. She rested her paw on the young cat's and brushed her fur aside, making her twitch when she brushed over the scratch. Solestar lingered on it as well, her claws pressing into it. Blackleaf groaned a bit; the tom's tail curled to the side when he saw her face.

"I bet it didn't hurt when that False Shadow touched it," Solestar mumbled.

Her eyes narrowed more as she pressed her claws into the scratch, clenching her teeth and purring. Blackleaf continued to groan,

holding her words and trying to move away. The tom almost loosened his pin when he heard her pain; Solestar's quick glance reaffirmed it. When she stopped, she brushed the mark she made. The skin was torn pink, but it did not bleed. She retracted her claws and sat to the pair's side, forcing Blackleaf to slide her head to see her.

"You remind me of a story, Blackleaf." Solestar was trying to keep the shaking in her voice under control. "An unfortunate one, and very similar to yours."

Blackleaf's ears perked up, as did the tom's.

"All those who knew about this died at some point during the Great Sky War. And I've never told anyone... I was the last surviving leader. And I was doubting my decisions without the others there, without StarClan. I had to deal with one of our senior warriors. She had released a cat we were interrogating out of pity – similar to what you tried to do. She was beaten, but never apologized for her actions. Not once. Some of our comrades that patrolled under her sympathized. The situation might've divided the clan if word got out, and we were already so weak. So, I acted on a story my mother told me when Star Covenant members first moved into this twolegplace. About how their ancient branches used to scare off larger clans by taking their she-cats, mating with them, and sending them back to their clans baring a Covenant tom's kits. Brutal, despicable, one of the reasons silverpelt clans established the warrior code in the first place. I was just so angry at that she-cat. And she-she threatened to divide the clan."

Blackleaf's eyes widened. The tom had loosened his grip on her neck.

"I waited for that traitor to go into heat. I took her and her sympathizers underground, to the tunnel beyond the medicine den. Dragged her myself by her neck. I ordered one of the toms we captured to the den, and told him to force himself onto her. It felt like a lifetime for the sympathizers – I could tell just by the way they looked at their senior. I looked into her eyes the whole time as she begged me to accept her apology, pleaded for the tom to get out of her... I had him, and the rest of our captives, killed that same

night. The traitor deserted before she could be executed. I prayed that whole night, even when sky-monsters were raining thunder. I begged StarClan for an answer. And you know what I got, Blackleaf...? Nothing! All the death I witnessed, the hatred and defeat in my heart. If this barbaric practice would not so much as condemn me, then nothing would bring them out. I ended that night tired, but victorious. Those sympathizers became loyal warriors once more. And I *never* prayed again."

The tom quickly pressured her neck before Solestar could look his way. Blackleaf began struggling again, keeping her eyes off her leader's. Her fur bristled enough to reveal additional scars next to her clan marks. A paw grabbed her face, claws pulling her skin; she was forced to look. She groaned again, the tom loosening his pressure on her. Solestar nearly pressed her muzzle against Blackleaf's forehead, holding it until her breathing eased. She moved back a bit, but stayed close.

Solestar cleared her throat. "You have a reputation for not once accepting a tom's advances. You violently reject all of your healthy suitors, but lust after some damaged old tom more loyal to his dead friends than the clan... If you were pregnant, you wouldn't be nimble enough to evade your comrades and that attitude of yours would die for good. You would even gain a scent. When you're next in heat, I should give you to one of our warriors as a reward. Maybe this one, if he keeps his mouth shut about this talk."

The tom nearly slid his muzzle from Blackleaf's neck. Her tail shuttered and wrapped around one of the bags. Her eyes were clenched shut.

"Everything I have been told about you is concerning, so you won't be going anywhere without supervision. Consider your authority as a medicine cat stripped. I hate how it had to come to this... Now get out of my sight. Both of you."

The young tom wasted no time removing himself from the medicine cat's neck and padding back to his post outside the den. Blackleaf left herself on the floor for a while, slowly prying her eyes open and facing Solestar. She did not even glance back, keeping her eyes on the underside of the table and letting her bob tail twitch about.

Blackleaf stood and brushed the bags and her vest, keeping her eyes on Solestar as she backed towards the entrance. She pried them away when she turned and nudged it open. Her chest began to heave; she loosened the vest a bit, but it did nothing.

"I still want to see you succeed, Blackleaf," Solestar said. "I still love you."

Blackleaf ignored her leader's words and left the den. Her paws slid across the floor and wandered towards the stairs. She did not stop heaving. The flank where Solestar had dug her claws began to hurt again. She brushed her tail against it, over and over. It only got worse. Blackleaf opened her mouth wide to breathe easier. She gagged a bit, fighting to keep control of her belly. Shutting her mouth and holding her chest, she screamed towards the smallest bit of light she could see. Her claws pressed against the gray-stone and her fur flared out. The tom at the end walked down the stairs and kept his eyes forward.

Chapter 30

The barking of her ride rang her ears so often that she was deaf to the river just pawsteps from them. She focused on spotting everything she could from the sliver between the bag and the hide flap that covered it. But the noise vibrated the whole vest, and she quickly was unable to concentrate. The falling snow blocked much of what she could see on the other side of the river; mostly gray and brown twoleg nests of varying disarray and the mostly cleared thunderpath that lay between each row. The only thing that managed to surface above her barking was the deep crackling of the floating ice chunks as they moseyed along.

"Calm down. They will come."

"Well they aren't moving fast enough!"

The cat slipped back in the bag and covered her ears. The sky had barely began darkening, yet the twoleg lights that lined the other side of the river had flickered on. The wind gently blew across the dog's fur, but she stood firm. Once she finally stopped barking, the cat poked her head to the top of the bag. She watched a group on the opposite side gather across from where they were. She could feel the heartbeat of her carrier rise, her large claws tapping as close as they could to the water without falling in. She glanced behind her; the white fields were still empty. Ahead, she spotted all-white fur on one of the cats, a pair of pink dots staring right at her. The dog shook, dropping her back to the bottom.

"Those mismatched eyes of yours are easier to see against my fur," Heidi growled. "Don't get yourself caught, or you'll ruin it for me."

"Ruin what?" Rye said.

The dog turned her empty bag towards the river, letting the cat peer over her back easier. Several pairs of eyes were closely watching the pair and everything around them. But she was fixed on Blackleaf's. Heidi stepped past the bank and onto one of the tall

ice blocks that had frozen to the side. It wobbled when she jumped back; the warriors on the other side hissed.

"Stay on your side!" one of them shouted.

"That's not important," Heidi growled. "There's someone in your territory that I want."

The warriors looked to Blackleaf, who they let take the lead. Rye watched them step away and glare at her. One kept his spot behind her, even moving closer.

"Answer me!" Heidi barked. "They know what I said."

"No, they don't," Blackleaf shouted. "They don't know wolf-speak."

"Well, I know cat-speak, so why'd you even bother bringing them? They're just getting in my way."

"That's the point. I've been ordered to talk to you, not let you into our territory."

Heidi stomped her paw. "Then I'm only talking to you. Wolf-speak it is. There's a dog in Shadow territory. And I want to find it."

Rye glanced at Heidi; her attention was sharply forward.

"You did *not* tell me about a dog," she whispered.

Heidi ignored her. "I don't know what breed it is, or what its health is like. But I know it's a war dog, and I need to bring it here to keep it safe."

Blackleaf stepped back and whispered to the rest of the group. One of them smacked her aside and hissed at Heidi, who barked back. She was pushed to the front again to speak. Rye hid away, her heart racing when she saw the energy drain from Blackleaf's expression.

"I'm not deaf. I heard a 'no', didn't I?" Heidi growled.

"The answer is no," Blackleaf shouted.

"And *why not*?"

"I have not been permitted to take requests from you. Only to listen."

"Listen... Blackleaf, I think? You're a medicine cat. You should understand that the dog could be scared or injured. How dangerous fear can make us. Fleetheart knows me. She knows I'm not here to make trouble."

"It will still be a no, but I need to inform Solestar about this," Blackleaf said.

"*Solestar*!?" Heidi roared. "That *tier* can hang by her ball tail! Her word is worth less than her dirt."

"You can't come in without her permission—"

"And I'll say it in cat-speak so they can all understand. I'll kill every last one of you if you stand in my way. There aren't enough of you to take me down!"

The warriors' ears perked up. Their tails dropped and they all hissed and growled at the war dog, who barked back. One of them turned Blackleaf around and yelled at her. Rye lingered on it, her heart beating faster when she saw the medicine cat become more submissive as it went on. Heidi stopped barking and watched the exchange, a scowl forming across her brow. One of the toms glanced across the river, motioning his tail in a circle. The warriors crowded around her and started whispering. Rye poked her head out further and swiveled her ears. They were too quiet to eavesdrop on. She did hear the scrapes of nearby paws; a pair of dogs were approaching from behind. Heidi paid no attention to it.

"I don't have time for your infighting," Heidi growled. "Let me cross and take that dog off your territory. It has nothing to do with your damn war."

"What makes you even think there is one?" One of the warriors stepped ahead of Blackleaf.

"I saw it!" Heidi yelled. "It was running along the river last night. I

saw it on my walk."

"If there was a dog, we would've killed it by now," another shouted.

"No, you wouldn't have. If it's a stray war dog, it can evade your patrols for moons and feed on carrion you can't eat. Let me find it."

"You're imagining it. Now go away."

Heidi howled; Rye fell into the bag and folded her ears flat.

"I'll let it know it is not alone!" Heidi shouted. "It will come to me."

A few of the warriors turned back towards the twoleg nests. Blackleaf lingered at the river's edge, watching the war dog howl. She even stepped closer to the river before being dragged away by one of the toms. She growled at him, but he did not let go of her tail. Rye peered over Heidi's back once more. One of the warriors was looking right at her; she ducked back down and stayed in the bag. As the Shadow group moved further away, the dogs coming behind the pair moved closer.

"Heidi!" One of them approached slowly. "It's time to go. We have to __"

"Juta, go *back* to the den," Heidi growled.

"We can discuss it there. *All* of us." Karin stepped between Heidi and the river.

"We need to get to the crossing. We can still find it before they do."

Juta shook her head. "It won't work. The masters broke it up when that rail machine came through. There's nowhere safe to cross east of the bridge anymore."

Karin pushed Heidi from the bank. "You have to lower your voice. You're barking loud enough to alert the masters. They might come __"

"I don't need a safe crossing and I don't care if the masters hear me. We need to find it before Solestar gets to it."

Karin and Juta glanced at each other, then to the other side of the river. The group of Shadow cats was out of sight, but the dogs did not bother to check for scents. Their ears fell; Heidi's perked up.

"I am *not* seeing things," she barked.

"You have before," Karin said, "and we just want to confirm—"

"I know what I saw!"

"Okay, okay," Juta said. "*Where* did you see it?"

"I was further east than this, near the deepest parts of Shadow territory. I called out to it, but it kept running. There's nothing that big in Shadow territory. It had to be a dog."

Karin and Juta glanced at each other again.

"You think this is another false alarm." Heidi growled.

"Heidi, we'd never ignore your words, but you need to calm down," Juta said.

She lunged at Juta; Karin reared up and matched her. She brought the pack leader to the ground and pushed against her struggle towards the river. Juta pulled her by the vest, and together they slid her from the river bank. Rye was shoved to the corner of the bag. Heidi slammed her forehead against Karin's muzzle. Juta backed off from a seething growl and towards Karin, who pushed her away when she tried to help her up.

"Heidi, you know it isn't like this," Karin growled.

"I am your alpha!" Heidi barked. "Don't forget that the next time you think I'm chasing shadows. I will *not* let Solestar torture another."

The pack leader feinted a lunge at the pair, and both flinched. She glared at them until she was over a small hill, then tapped her vest with her muzzle. Rye scattered to the top and fell into the snow. Heidi walked off without looking back. Careful to stay out of sight of the river, she waited until Juta and Karin walked over the hill

and past her. Rye backed off when she heard Karin growl, Juta keeping a few steps away. She watched both of them fade into the darkening fields, while Heidi approached the twoleg structures of UnderClan.

Chapter 31

She carefully plucked the feathers of the pigeon away before biting into its chest. She savored the warmth its flesh still held, letting it linger in her mouth for a while before swallowing. The feathers were carefully aligned in a pile, next to a shallow hole she had buried in the snow. Rye brushed away whatever she could from the quills before adding more. The others were already gnawing at the bones of the rabbits they ate. One of the dogs tossed their bones down the hole to their den. Another growled.

"Dona, come on!" Juta shook her head and entered the den. "It takes so long for blood to air out of there."

"But we always eat in there," Dona whimpered. "There's blood stains everywhere."

Karin pushed her carcass behind her. "We don't eat inside until Heidi comes back."

The five sat just outside of the collapsed thunderpath that made up their den. Dona was still whimpering, sitting closest to the den's entrance and sniffing the inside occasionally. Juta emerged from it and tossed the carcass. Dona watched it fly over her head and behind her; she pounced it moments later. Wolfgang was sitting on the intact thunderpath, what made up the den's ceiling. After briefly glancing at Juta, he looked at the sky. The overcast threatened snow, again. The daylight was gently diffused across the snow and kept it a calm shade of white. Far above the clouds, the hissing of sky-monsters echoed through his ears. They traveled the same path each time they flew overhead. Karin was walking over to Dona, who picked up the rabbit carcass she was approaching and tossed it to her own.

"Hey, why do you eat so slow?" Dona said.

"Because she has a smaller mouth, idiot," Juta growled.

"Aww, are you still mad about the rabbit thing?"

"What – you just threw it in there a minute ago! You're giving Heidi something more to be upset about."

"You where there, cat. What did Heidi see?"

Rye swallowed her food. "I was there to try and signal to any onlooking warrior-rah. I did not see a dog."

"You also tried that yesterday morning," Karin said. "Did you see it then?"

"I was also trying to alert my branch then, and walked as close as I dared to the river. Shadow patrols were unusually absent. I saw no Covenant cats and no dog."

The group was quiet for a while, listening to the constant droll of the breeze and snow. One by one, the dogs glanced between each other and towards the river. Dona began shaking a little; Karin's glare stopped her.

"Well, Shadow territory is vast," said Juta. "If it were me, I would stay away from the river. Too much activity."

The others ignored her. Rye watched each of them occupy themselves before Dona's pep returned.

"I hear something coming," she said.

"You mean you *smell* something coming?" Juta said. "It's a disgusting cat."

"Hey," Rye mewed.

"No, I mean he really smells. All deep patrols do. Damn UnderClan, sculking around in mud and God-knows-whatever else is down there."

Rye turned around; the scent of the dirty tom hit her. She did not recoil like the others, but rolled her tongue. He was covered in mud so thick his fur was hidden. He stopped far from the group, keeping

his eyes low to hide their color. His tail whirled around in a slow circle, pointing to all of them at one point, and then at himself.

"Why should we?" Juta barked.

"Heidi calls you. As does Clementstar." He muffled his voice.

"Finally!" Karin perked up and started following. "The usual spot?"

The tom nodded, and ran back the way he came. Rye tried spotting a hint of his color beneath the cover, but was too distracted with his scent.

"Slow down there," Juta said. "I'm not following right behind him."

"Heidi's calling us," Karin barked. "We have to go."

"I think he smelled kind of good," Dona whispered.

"How about you just worry about Heidi instead, okay?" Karin waited for the tom to leave eyeshot, squeezing through a small hole under the snow. "There. He's gone. Happy now?"

"No, because his scent is still around." Juta followed, curling her nose. "Seriously. Everything down there's supposed to be dead. Where does he find the scent of rat carcass' tunnel scum?"

Dona, Wolfgang, and Rye fell in behind Juta and Karin. Wolfgang tossed his carcass with the others, and was careful not to kick snow into the den's entrance. His eyes were fixed ahead. Rye kept to his side, watching the others instead. She saw Dona's legs shake again.

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A gentle snow began falling as the group approached the twoleg structures. Rye listened to the wind flow right through the holes in their teal walls and out the other sides, ringing hollow the whole way through. They were in rows of two, evenly spaced from each

other and as long as a tree. They were not much taller than a large twoleg, but it was enough to block some of the diffused sunlight. The snow was thinner, cleared by the heat from the twoleg pipes and mechanisms lining the nests. The trickle of water from the gutters evenly spaced out against their bases echoed above the wind, and took her mind off the sky-monster still circling overhead. They wandered between them, keeping themselves low when they passed by direct line of sight of the bridge. Once they were hidden, they took positions close to the warm pipes. Dona began panting, ruffling her fur and letting her tongue flop about. Wolfgang slid away from her. Juta and Dona sat beside Rye, watching Karin pace about.

"Stop pacing," Juta growled. "You're making me nervous."

"I *am* nervous," Karin whimpered.

A pair of warriors stepped from behind a pile of rubble and quickly ran the length of the nest, hardly even glancing at the group. Once they reached the end, they peered around the corners of the nests they stood between and nodded. One of them banged once on a loose piece of silverwood and ran off. Out from that same pile of rubble stepped a third. Rye recognized the cat's limp as he slowly approached the dogs. His fur was on edge, and his tail was parallel with his body. It was cleaner, the tan easier to distinguish from his black face. She looked at the charm above his ankle. It was shiny, the tuft of fake-fur on the end white again. He stopped out of pouncing range of the dogs.

"I trust you not to lop my head off just because I'm alone this time." The shaking in his voice irgnored the calm swagger Rye remembered.

"Of course not." Dona said. "This pack loves Clement!"

"That's debatable." Clementstar looked back. Heidi showed herself.

"Heidi!" Karin barked.

"Keep your voice down," Clementstar hissed. "We don't know who's listening."

"You're too young to be this paranoid," Heidi growled.

Rye watched each exhausted step the pack leader took towards them. Her face gave nothing away, but her body sagged from its usual intimidating posture. Karin sniffed in her direction. A quick snap from Heidi's jaw made her stop.

"I brought them, like you asked." Heidi sat next to Karin. "Now talk."

Clementstar shook his head. "Heidi asked me about a dog. Ran up and down my territory all night trying to find it. I told her what I knew, if she agreed to stop giving my patrols away and assemble you the next day."

"What did you know?" Karin said.

"Neither deep nor surface patrols noticed any dogs in Shadow territory. But there's a lot of ground we can't cover. I have to take Heidi's word for it."

The pack leader growled, taking a step towards him.

"I did what you asked. Now hear me out. This is just as important, and you might not like what you're going to hear."

Heidi snapped at him and sat back in her position.

"Somewhere in your announcement, I better hear why you snubbed me," Rye said.

"I apologize for that ahead of time," Clementstar said. "Matters of the war were weighing on me, and have gotten heavier... It's almost over."

Dona's ears perked up. "Really!?"

"And we're going to be the losers if I don't make a move soon."

Her ears dropped right back down. Rye glanced at Heidi in time to see her shake the shock from her face. She noticed her breathing getting slightly faster. Clementstar slid closer to the group.

"Nothing said here—"

"Leaves this space," Juta said. "We know."

"The only reason I'm even telling you this is because it affects you." Clementstar took a deep breath, glancing around before speaking. "A few nights ago, we fought the Shadows on the bridge. It was a distraction for some of our senior warriors to infiltrate Shadow territory not far from it. The raid was discovered, and failed. It blew our last known crossing to them, and they pushed rocks onto it to break it up. The only way to their clan now is through the tunnels. They've been careful to seal them up."

Heidi's eyes widened. "You revealed it? Clement, that was—"

"I know!" he hissed. "It's what you were promised in exchange for staying out of our tunnels. But Dovewhisker was worth it. I couldn't leave her for dead."

"Dovewhisker?" Karin's ears fell. "She was captured?"

"It doesn't matter," Juta said. "You risked several senior warriors for one?"

Clementstar's claws scraped the snow. "She's our last medicine cat. We *need* her."

Even Wolfgang sat more attentive on hearing it. The dogs glanced at each other. Heidi's eyes were firmly on the UnderClan leader.

"We have seen her before," Rye said. "We had no idea she was a medicine cat. But why is she over there in the first place?"

"It *wasn't my call*!" Clementstar took a moment to settle his claws. "It wasn't my call. She disobeyed orders and followed a group of spies – it's my fault, really. Even I don't know the location of all our ranking members. My own rules. I just assumed she wouldn't disobey me."

"A medicine cat would never just abandon their post. What could be worth that?"

"Dovewhisker wanted answers. She sought council from the Stars. Said she wanted to visit the Shadow's sacred spot and return from the now-destroyed western path. I said it was too dangerous. She wanted to fulfil her role, the way she felt she had to. And keep a promise to her littermate... I should stop seeing the Axin Mess as just some story. A medicine cat leader named Yellowstar did the same thing in *hamburg*."

"Surely you have pupils," Karin whimpered. "And Dovewhisker can't be the only one."

Clementstar looked around again. "Her littermate drowned himself a few moons ago. Far west of the bridge, so the Shadows never noticed. He was our other medicine cat. And there were no apprentices. Another failing of mine... We tried negotiating for Dovewhisker and the rest of the spies, but that failed. The arguing at the bridge indirectly lead to the death of Windstripe, as well. The senior warriors that tried to rescue her a few nights ago saw her with one of their medicine cats, Blackleaf. The failed attempt definitely revealed her as important. Solestar has to believe she is a medicine cat or a deputy. Blueclaw refuses to help, but she knows too little about twoleg or herbal medicine to be a replacement. We're out of options and running out of time. I pray for Dovewhisker and the others, if they aren't already dead. But need a replacement now. I need you, Rye."

"You *what*!?" Rye took a few steps back.

"In your five or so moons of life, you've learned anti-canid techniques, wolf-speak, and how to use your supposed 'powers' to perfection. I'm sure you know more than me about fighting and medicine. You can't replace Dovewhisker, but UnderClan will collapse by newleaf with no one. And I'm not giving you a choice."

"What do you mean by that?" Heidi growled.

"I'll raid your Covenant branch if you refuse. *You* would be attacking them, not me."

The dogs' eyes widened as Clementstar took a few steps back, watching Heidi's paws twitch. Rye's fur stood on end, growling as

she slowly approached.

"Our enclave is within Shadow territory with no paths to the underground," she growled. "Unless you plan on tempting fate with the river, you have no way of—"

"You fell down a particular hole coming here." Clementstar's anxiousness scattered his voice. "There is another one, buried under the snow you fell atop. Dig that away, and there is a narrow tube that leads to an underground twoleg shelter. The stairs are still intact. The entrance the twolegs would've used is blocked by wood planks that look solid on the outside. But there is a crack down the middle facing inward that a heavy warrior could break through. On the other side, there should be a clean den with a large circle in the middle. At nights, the moonlight shines on an elevated—"

"No way." Rye's paws shook. "That is where I address the elite warrior-rah. Even the Shadows do not know what happens in there... By the Stars, you *have* had a way in this whole time! My herald could only speculate."

"Hey, Clement, what is this?" Juta growled. "You never resort to threats and ultimatums. Not even when we arrived."

"I won't let my clan down again," Clementstar growled. "They don't like the Star Covenant, but they *hate* the Clan of False Shadows. If you were forced, it might make it easier for the clan to accept outside help. I don't want to do this, but we didn't fight for this long, only to lose because I ignored two of the most important members of the clan."

Rye's paws stopped shaking. She shook loose snow from her back and took a deep breath. Looking past him, she could barely make out the mass of gray lines that made up the bridge. Small blurs were running on and off it periodically. She lingered on one until it vanished from her narrow field of view. Heidi's ears perked up at the faint whistle of the sky-monster. Her teeth were bore, and her legs were stiff. The others had backed away a bit.

"I do not like this," Rye said. "I want something in return. You have to let me contact my branch—"

"You didn't tell me about this, Clement." The two looked at Heidi; her growl made their fur stand on end.

"It's a decision that involves the clans," Clementstar said. "As per your request, I try to keep your pack out of our problems."

"This goes beyond that," Heidi growled. "You're talking about forcing a kitten to your side on the threat of killing bystanders who have no knowledge or say."

Rye faced the pack leader. "The war affects our branch, too. And my word is—"

"Don't give me that horseshit! Your whole branch could be ambushed and killed because of something they had no say in. And you're willing to go along with it!?"

"I believe the decision is hers to make," Clementstar said.

"The moment you resorted to tactics like theirs, and like hers, I became part of that decision. And I say no."

"She accepted the request. I don't see—"

"*I said no!*"

Heidi barked at Clementstar, who jumped back with his fur on edge. He took a step back for each she took forward.

"You don't get to threaten others into fixing your mistakes. The masters make threats. Solestar makes threats. As long as I'm pack leader, I will not let her submit to the corrupted morals of the clans. Wolfgang, grab the kitten."

He stepped forward, looking into Heidi's angry glare before snatching up Rye in his jaws.

Rye flailed about. "Put me down! I said I would go."

"Heidi, please." Clementstar kept his distance. "If we let her into the tunnels without leverage, she might find a way to escape back to her branch with crippling knowledge of our clan. Imagine if our

situation leaked to the Shadows. Solestar wouldn't hesitate to—"

Heidi kicked loose snow in his face. He kicked a loose sheet of silverwood three times. After a few moments, several warriors took positions behind him, and two in front. Heidi backed away, motioning the others to follow. The pack shared glances, but fell into formation next to their leader. Rye stopped struggling and arced her head towards the warriors.

"You have to get a message to my herald," she shouted. "It has been almost a moon without contact. He will do something drastic if he believes me dead or captured."

Clementstar pushed ahead of his warriors as the pack backed away with Rye. They passed by the edge of the paired structures and turned to their right around the corner. The warriors followed and kept their distance. Their leader turned the corner in time to witness Heidi ordering Wolfgang away. He was already padding out of earshot. The others held their ground, constantly glancing at Heidi.

"You're all just going to let this happen?" Clementstar shouted. "I *know* none of you agree with her."

"I should've known better than to trust clan cats at war," Heidi said. "I know it messes with your mind. Clan cats aren't intelligent enough to be in one this long. I should've known!"

"Heidi, you know me. There's too much at stake to—"

"It doesn't matter anymore. It just doesn't matter. Only that dog matters..."

The others were silent, lingering on the UnderClan warriors until Heidi waved them all away. Hesitating still, they eventually ran to catch up to Wolfgang.

Clementstar and Heidi locked eyes.

"You're condemning UnderClan to Solestar. We need something to give us an advantage. Anything."

Heidi glanced at the charm on Clementstar's leg. Her fur relaxed, and her jaw clenched up. She held her tongue, even when the warriors stopped approaching. Her attention was taken for a moment by the sound of the passing sky-monster. Glancing back at the rest of her pack, she left the group and headed towards the river.

Chapter 32

She stretched her paws until she felt the joints crack. Her tail was still pinned to her side. She let it fall in line with her back again. The morning sun gave the overcast a blue tint instead of its usual gray. It was early enough for the twoleg lights to still be up in some places. Her ears swiveled around to hear a rooster crowing in the distance. For a short while, the structures of the twolegplace around her were forgotten. She took in the slight breeze, its chill waking her further. And, further than anything else, was an orange glow from where the overcast ended. The horizon was blocked from full view, but she enjoyed what she could while she stretched. She walked up the ramp of snow and out the den. It was not long before one of the dogs followed.

"I am certain I cannot run away from you," Rye said.

Juta nodded. "True. But Heidi said you have to be under guard."

"I am just watching the sunrise."

"I know. But they're Heidi's orders. Besides, you missed the sunrise."

"I am still not accustomed to your 'militeary schedule'."

"It's 'military'. And you seem to have adjusted well enough."

Rye did not look back at Juta, who pushed some snow aside and sat beside her. She caught a glimpse of Rye's scowl.

"I hope you aren't mad at Heidi," Juta said.

"Why would I not be?" Rye growled. "Kritz has no word on whether I am alive or dead, and the only possibility I had to tell him of my progress is held on the sudden shift in personality from your leader."

"Clement would've never let you contact your branch."

"I could have found a way. I am not stupid."

"Neither is he. *Paris* made him accustomed to many unconventional tactics. He'd probably know your move before you made it."

Rye shook her head. "I do not care where he is from. To me, he is an overwhelmed kittypet with no faith in StarClan and an unhealthy obsession with secrecy. He offered me a way to do what I came here to do in the first place."

"Heidi didn't agree," Juta said. "She didn't like you being threatened."

"The pack has shown a great deal of tolerance the half-moon I have been here, but frankly my matters are none of her concern. She has no business saying what was good for me yesterday when she is off *right now* chasing a ghost."

Juta growled. "Watch your mouth. She's no less capable than the rest of us."

More claws sloshed through the den's ramp. Wolfgang emerged and immediately hopped on the lip of the hole, laying and watching the sky. Dona jumped right over him; Rye watched the determination on her face for a heartbeat before fading to the usual flappy tongue and twitching ears. The twoleg lights in the distance clicked off, leaving a black tint to everything in the distance. Including the blobs out of earshot and evenly spaced around the den.

"Aww, the cats are still around," Dona whimpered, sitting and resting her front paws on Wolfgang's back. "They're going to see my den carvings before they're finished."

"Forget the den carvings," Rye said. "They are just scratches. I need to leave."

"If you look closely, they tell a story," Dona whimpered.

"You asked all day and night yesterday. You aren't going anywhere," Juta said. "If you do, I'll have Wolfgang chase you down and eat you."

"You can have cat so many ways. I'm sure he'll pick whichever way I want you!"

"Dona, shut up and enjoy the sunrise."

"But it's already past—"

"Is this humorous to you?" Rye growled. The fur on the back of her neck rose. "My branch has no idea if I am alive or dead. And I am being held hostage by a pack of dogs. Do you have any idea how worried Kritz must be?"

"I don't even know who Kritz is," Juta snapped. "Don't you know any other names besides his?"

Rye's fur relaxed. She pawed through the snow.

"Guess that's a no."

"Just let me go out and look for Heidi. Karin has been gone since yesterday evening."

Juta and Dona glanced at each other.

"Her mood changed so suddenly. She has been perfectly reasonable, if reserved. But ever since that evening two days ago she is never around and snapping at everything. You know this order is just as absurd as Clementstar thinks it is."

"If you knew what she's been through, that order wouldn't seem so absurd."

The breeze had picked up a bit, and the temperature fell a little with it. The first flakes of new snowfall fell around them. Rye looked up at Juta's face. Her attention was behind her. The trees were shifting around as dozens of blackbirds took flight from their empty branches. Her ears twitched when she heard their rakish cries. Her ears swiveled around, and she leaned slightly closer. Her eyes narrowed when one of them approached. It landed on Dona's head; she stayed perfectly still. Wolfgang was uninterested.

Kraw. Raw.

"Sorry, Karin isn't here," Dona said. "I can take a message."

The blackbird shook its head.

"That's not what he said," Juta growled.

"I could speak it if you taught me," Dona whimpered, kneading Wolfgang's back.

Kraw-kraw. Clok clok clok clok. Awk.

Juta snatched Rye in her jaws and threw the she-kit on her back. Before she could jump off, the blackbird flew away and Juta began following it.

"What do you think you are doing!?" Rye said.

"It's faster for me if you just hang on," Juta yelled, picking up speed. "It's Karin."

"I'd rather stay here and watch the den!" Dona barked.

"You do that," Juta yelled back. "I'll try to find Heidi afterward, so take care of food."

"What is happening? Where are we going?" Rye dug her claws into Juta's fur as she sped up again.

"Dona doesn't speak bird-song and neither do you, apparently. Karin's in trouble with the ravens again. And maybe you can get a lesson from all this."

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The speed kept her eyes nearly shut. Through the snowfall she could barely make out a group of trees in the distance. The breeze had stopped, but Juta was still running fast enough to keep Rye's head down. She constantly glanced to her left and right, keeping

track of the cats that moved with her in the far distance. Shaking her head of snow, she finally started walking. Rye hopped off and shook out her fur. Juta was fixed on a large tree atop a hill. Karin was in front of it, and groups of blackbirds were on alert atop surrounding trees. The scent did not hit Rye until they closed in on the bottom of the hill. Her eyes widened when she spotted the feathers floating about. The blood covered the base of the tree. Some of it was dried, but much of it was wet. Near her paws lay a dead blackbird, carved open to the bone. Its eyes were wide; Rye hopped back when she saw its jaw move and caw softly. Juta ignored it and began padding up the hill. She was careful to keep her paws silent as they sank into the deep snow. Rye stayed put at the bottom. Blackbirds began landing around the hill. The dying one was dragged away by a pair who only kept close to Rye for a heartbeat, puffing up their chests to keep her attention elsewhere.

Juta cleared her throat.

Karin's shoulders flexed; there was blood even on the back of her neck.

"Karin?"

She was motionless.

"It's me, Karin. Did the blackbirds say something stupid again?"

The war dog growled.

"Okay, no, not stupid. Rude. They said that word, didn't they?"

Karin whimpered. Her legs were shaking as Juta got closer.

"Remember what we talked about?"

She was still shaking.

"How many this time?"

Juta was halfway up the hill.

"Karin? How many this time?"

"Seven," Karin whimpered.

Juta reached the top of the hill, keeping a tail-length from Karin. She was still shaking, and did not acknowledge her friend. Rye took a few steps up the hill, tempted further with each additional step. The blackbirds that surrounded her began clicking and extending their wings, ready to take off. The younger birds focused their attention on the war dogs and croaked.

"They're staring at us," Karin whimpered.

"Don't worry about them," Juta whispered. "I warned them—"

"No! *They're staring at us*!"

Karin spun around and growled, slowly walking down the hill and towards the growing flock of grounded blackbirds. Rye was halfway up.

"Rye get out of the way," Juta said.

The she-kit saw Karin's face. A streak of blood ran from her right eye across her back and shoulders. Her nose was bleeding itself, coating the front of her muzzle while the bird's covered the rest. It ran from the corners of her mouth. Bits of flesh were stuck to her neck, clinging on by its damp fur. Snowflakes covered her back and sides, never once bothering to shake them loose. Her legs were still trembling. Behind her lay the corpses of six blackbirds. Their bodies had been dragged against the tree and left at the base, bark splintered into their chests and their heads snapped at the necks. Some of them were missing wings, leaving puffed red flesh where they should have been and scores of feathers scattered about. One of them was still oozing from its blown-out eye socket. Rye lingered on it, feeling her belly wretch at the contorted twitches its remains made.

"I said get out of the way!" Juta barked.

Rye jumped to the side. Karin paid no attention. She approached the blackbirds, now dozens in number. Juta was close behind, tapping her flank.

"It's done, Karin. Just—"

A kick to her jaw downed Juta with a whimper. She held her muzzle in the snow, keeping her head down for only a moment. Karin drew closer to the flock, puffing her own chest and growling. The blackbirds in the trees shouted and cawed, some circling overhead.

Kraw! Fa, fa!

The flock of young birds shouted in unison; some took off and flew away.

Karin tilted her jaw. *Klawk. Klawk awk.*

"Don't!" Juta shouted, running towards her. "They're just going to say it again."

The war dog bared her teeth. *Klawk rua.*

One of the birds dropped a rough silver ring from his mouth.

"Rye, run away!" Juta said.

Kraw. Fas, fas. Fas, fas!

Karin lunged into the flock; a mass of feathers engulfed her. Some tried flying away. She jumped and snatched three in her jaw, crushing them. She landed as Juta leapt towards her but kicked her in the chest to stop it. Throwing the birds aside, Karin lunged at some who fled over Rye's head. Rye barely saw her approach before a paw smacked her face. She fell and clutched her cheek. Karin was mauling two more. The wing from one was torn as it was flung from her mouth and into the snow. As the young blackbirds routed, they overcrowded the ambience with their caws and clicks. Rye lifted herself when snow was kicked onto her. Juta grappled Karin and pressed her weight onto her back. She only held for a moment before collapsing. She thrashed and snapped her jaw in every direction; Juta pressed her own jaw against Karin's forehead and shoved it into the snow. The muscles of both stopped bulging. Karin began whimpering, hitting her ears and letting Juta stroke her shoulder.

"They did it again!" Karin whined.

"She's fine," Juta said. "You know she's fine."

"Why do they always do this!? I'm just trying to look for my friend."

"I know."

"Her vest is loose. They pecked part of it off. She's a devil when her vest is off!"

"Heidi's vest will be fine—"

"No, it won't. It'll fall off this time. It'll fall off!"

Rye approached. Juta shook her head, but she approached anyway. She could see the blood that had brushed off Karin's muzzle to Juta's shoulders, her face buried in the red snow around her. She still had feathers in her fur, which Juta was picking out and piling up. She picked up the silver ring that Karin dropped nearby and threw it at Rye.

"I want to help," Rye said.

"No, you don't." Juta's voice was shaking.

"You said you were teaching me something. I have never seen anything like... this."

"Well now you know. There's a reason we keep to ourselves. Why we don't go back to the masters or get involved in clan politics. Besides, there's not a thing you can help us with. You're worshipped as a god. You haven't seen anything. You haven't *done* anything. The clan's war will end with or without you. Most of those ravens are several times your age, smarter than any of us, and *still* lack the wisdom to leave us the fuck alone! The ones who interfere usually end up dead. So don't give me that 'I want to help' nonsense. You want to go to UnderClan, on a *threat*, and think about helping some mystery cat among the Shadows. Now you want to help us because you're curious of what you just saw? You're not even capable of thinking for yourself. Maybe you're worse than what Heidi said of you."

Rye backed away. Juta was growling at her, baring her teeth. Karin was still curled up in the snow, making no effort to clean herself. The overcast finally let morning light shine through some parts, but the snowfall covered much of it. Rye glanced up at the light shining through, then back to Juta's snarled muzzle. Many of the blackbirds were fleeing away, their bird-song ignored by the others. Some stayed to drag their dead away from the dogs. The she-kit almost fell with each step back she took. When she was nearly a tree-length from Juta, her expression softened. She tended to Karin. Watching it made Rye's belly churn. Her heartbeat began to race. Her breaths were deeper; Juta glanced. She felt her claws dig at the frost below the snow. Before they chilled, she bolted from it and onto a nearby gray-stone. Moments later, she took off along it. The remaining blackbirds stared down at her from the trees and cawed, waving their wings and beaks. She could hear Juta bark twice and howl long to the sky. Rye did not look back.

Chapter 33

The chilled air did not help her. She came to a stop when the shaking in her legs was unbearable, crashing into the thin part of a gray-stone path. She pushed some of the snow from her belly and let the frigid stone calm her. She glanced up at the sky. The overcast and snowfall blocked the setting sun, even at the horizon. The sky even kept much of its gray, barely shining orange. The roar of one of the sky-monsters pounded her ears as it flew just above the overcast. She was too tired to keep them folded back. She tried focusing on the churning of the river's ice blocks, hidden from view by a hill she collapsed behind. Ahead of her, running along the river, was a long barrier the height of a twoleg made of thin silver rods bent in perfect diamonds. It was blocking a set of tree-sized rods sticking out of the river and a narrow path leading to the faint stretch of Shadow territory she could see in the distance. Her attention shifted forward, with nothing but a dense stretch of bare trees and stone paths. When her breathing finally slowed down she tried to stand, but let herself fall again. Her claws were out, and she began tapping at the snow. Rye let her tail be slid about by the wind gusts that scrambled the snowfall for a few moments at a time. Then she smelled the fur of fresh-kill. Glancing to her sides, she spotted the silhouette of a cat to her right. It was far out of earshot, but it still looked at her. The scent was behind her. Wolfgang approached with something in his mouth. His ears flopped about as he tossed a mouse a tail-length in front of her. She had to twist her head all the way around to see his face from under his imposing size. Glancing around himself, he sat next to her and pushed the mouse within her reach. She looked into his beady, black eyes while he was fixed on scenting straight ahead.

"Thank you," Rye said, taking a deep breath and sitting upright.

He nodded, keeping his attention forward.

She sniffed the mouse. No foul parts, no bite marks.

"The sun is setting, and I have been running around since this

morning," Rye said. "You had the energy to hunt *and* follow me all day?"

Wolfgang flexed his leg muscles and went back to looking forward.

"Of course."

Rye tore into the mouse's belly and stripped it faster than she thought. Within moments, much of it was already down her throat. She began gnawing at its shoulders when something took her attention. She focused as much as she could, but the blob moved quick. It nearly jumped from tree to tree, as if it was trying to hide. Wolfgang's tail twitched around. He sniffed forward a bit, his face curling. His paws began kneading at the snow, resisting the urge to run after it. Rye looked closer and slid the mouse aside, her heart racing. The vest blocked much of her silhouette, but Heidi was jumping and dashing between the bases of the tree and sniffing at their roots.

Wolfgang crouched. Rye followed.

"Can she detect us?"

Wolfgang sniffed himself, then ran his nose through Rye's fur. He shook his head.

"Then we have the element of surprise... for what that is worth."

Rye flattened the fur on her head. A paw slammed in front of her before she could slide her own forward.

"What?"

Wolfgang kept his eyes on Heidi. She was approaching the river, once even glancing in their direction without noticing them. She dug at something under the snow for a bit, then left it to approach the silverrod barrier. She bit at the diamonds and tried bending them, but they did not. Hitting it repeatedly with her claws, she barked and slammed her head into it. Wolfgang winced when her breathing grew heavy, his ears perking up at each of her feint growls.

Rye stepped forward again, but Wolfgang blocked her.

"She is right there," Rye whispered. "I thought you wanted to find her."

Wolfgang whimpered through his nose.

"What? You do not wish to get her? I thought you all cared about what happens to her."

He growled, keeping his eyes on her.

"Are you afraid of her, too?"

Slamming his paw, Wolfgang held a bark when Heidi briefly poked her head up from digging at the base of the silverrod barrier.

"You are. At least, you look—"

The war dog snatched Rye in his jaw, smacking the mouse away. He leapt behind a hill of snow and ran away from the trees, glancing at Heidi every few heartbeats. She continued trying to dig underneath, but stopped and slammed her head against it again. He slowed when he reached a short stone barrier that bordered the twoleg's path. Rye struggled a bit when she lost vision of the war dog leader. Wolfgang tossed her into it and towered over it, slamming his paw against it and growling at her. The she-kit's tail was pushed between her legs and her fur was on edge. But she stood against him.

"Why? You have been searching for her. I am certain Karin would appreciate finding—"

Wolfgang hit the barrier again, baring his fangs and leaning into the she-kit's face.

"I told Juta I wanted to help, and I got the same look," Rye growled. "I have been running around UnderClan's surface territory all day to prove to her I am useful. And when she finally appears, we just stand here and watch. Do you not want to be helped? What is wrong with you all?"

The war dog stopped growling and stared at her. His breathing eased a bit, along with his brow. He backed off of Rye, letting her see his face in full. A massive scar, hidden by his fur, ran from his right eye to his nose. She studied it, the gash deep from what she could see. The rest of his face was covered in small scars and dents, like the others'. She lingered on his eyes, though, nearly black from corner to corner.

"I should know better than to say that," Rye said. "Incarnates of Rye exist to punish, convert, or subdue those who have the power or motivation to do harm to StarClan's will. If I am here, something is supposed to be wrong, and I am to correct it... I apologize. I should know that helping oneself is not always possible, but I do not. Juta is right. I have not seen anything. I have not done anything."

Wolfgang sniffed her, glanced over the barrier, and leaned in. He brought the scar close to her.

"Karin said Heidi can be a 'devil' when she is like this. Is... Is that scar from her?"

He shook his head, pointing his muzzle to the distant twoleg structures.

"You got it from the twolegs. No, their war. The Great Sky War?"

He nodded.

"My herald taught me of their weapons. One called a 'thunderstick' is capable of killing anything it points at. It supposedly shoots lightning and is very loud. Did one of those do that to you?"

He nodded again, backing off a bit.

"But why do you want me to know this? I have no firsthand account with that war, nor can I understand what it must have felt like to receive that injury. Or what it has done to you... Even if I want to, I do not know what I can do for you."

Wolfgang kneeled, stretching his neck and shaking the snow off. He motioned Rye to move closer. She was just a pawstep away when he nodded, brushing his neck. She parted his fur. Dozens of scars

lay beneath the long strands of hair. Some parts had such thin fur that she needed to just look closely. Some ran the length of his neck, while others were indented in his skin. She pushed her paw past her neck and ran it along his shoulder. Even more scars, smaller than those on his neck, covered the skin. Rye felt her belly churn whenever her paw felt a bump from the larger ones. Her eyes could not linger on the countless smaller ones, though. She followed her paw to Wolfgang's leg. He nodded. She reared up and reached the side of his belly when he stood, never taking his eyes from the she-kit. The scars were bigger, but his fur was longer and fuller. It covered many of the small ones from view even when she parted it. She followed one that ran from his shoulder to his thigh. She stopped, letting herself fall back into Wolfgang's sight. His eyes were narrow. His ears seemed lower than usual, folded over most of his cheek. Not a single tooth was exposed, and the fur on his chin was damp from resting his muzzle in the snow. He let out a quiet whimper before poking his nose over the barrier and at Heidi.

"I cannot even begin to imagine where all of those came from," Rye said. "Your life must not have been easy."

Wolfgang shook his head.

"Dare I ask... is there anything I can do to help?"

He nodded, parting the fur on his shoulder.

"I do not understand. I cannot heal scars."

His tail wagged a bit. His ears even came up from his cheek.

"But what have I done?"

He licked her cheek. She brushed it away.

"All I did was look at them."

Wolfgang turned towards her, tail still wagging. He stood straight, just tall enough to keep himself behind the barrier. Parting his fur again, he leaned close.

"Did I do something right?"

He nodded, brushing her fur away with his paws and looking closely.

"What are you doing? I do not have any—"

His large claw carefully ran to her chest, tapping at a small scar.

"You know that was from Heidi when we fought." Rye stepped away. "It is nothing like... the ones you have."

Wolfgang shook his head, tapping her forehead and nodding.

"If you are asking what I think of it, I got it from asking about what I was hinted not to. It is my fault."

He cleared some of the snow beneath him before lying down and nodding.

Rye shook her head. "If I was born to ensure the Clan of False Shadows would be pacified, then I could not do anything else. Heidi told me that I was incapable of *wanting* to help anyone. That I did not know who Blackleaf was, or why I wanted to keep her out of danger. But I do know why. It is because she has the desire to... Oh. I am going to offend again. After all—"

Wolfgang growled, tapping her forehead with his claws until she pushed it away.

"Okay, fine! It is not just about Blackleaf anymore. When I saw her pray, the way she kept to herself, always searching for something. I will not condemn her. She wants to bring StarClan back, just as I do. Now she appears to be led around like a pet on a leash by her allies. Her clan is punishing her for trying to help them. How is that fair? It is not fair that Karin gets taunted by blackbirds. It is not fair Heidi is breaking down. None of it is! But I can fix it. I have powers. I have a branch. Why does subduing the Shadows have to mean everyone dies in the process?"

The war dog tilted his head to the side.

"Yes. That is why I came here initially. If I could help Clement broker some kind of prisoner exchange, then UnderClan might also

have a blackcough infection to balance out the power they are gaining by not losing warriors. The war would continue long enough to allow our allies to arrive and strike at both weakened clans, ensuring neither silverpelt nor ancestral sects spread no further in this twolegplace. But it is not about that. Not for me. Ancestral teachings may make her a heretic, but the way I see it her allies are the heretics and she is at least trying... I want to help her. I can prove that I want to help her! And I cannot do that if I am in captivity."

Wolfgang closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and nodding.

"I... I usually do not become so agitated. I am sorry if I frightened you."

He rolled his eyes.

"And I was truly frightened by what I witnessed with Karin and the blackbirds this morning. I hope you do not think my motivation is selfish."

He tapped her chest, over her heart.

"Helping Blackleaf will be dangerous, physically and spiritually. Just as helping Heidi will be. If I can help you by simply bearing witness, then perhaps it will work for her."

Wolfgang stood, shaking his fur again and peeking over the side. He motioned Rye to do the same. Both watched Heidi dig at the base of the silverrod barrier. She had made several other holes in the process, and dented the barrier over each of them. Wolfgang whimpered to himself before returning to cover. She lingered for a while. The distant war dog appeared to keep digging, even when nothing came to the surface. She occasionally stopped to put her ear to the barrier. Her vest shifted about, never stopping to adjust it or slide it back to her chest. Wolfgang tugged her leg, and she dropped back down.

"I no longer wish to see everyone else as strangers, targets, or likewise. I will be worthy of this sacred life and power. And that starts with Heidi and ends with Blackleaf. I thank you, Wolfgang,

for giving me direction."

He nodded, stretching his paws and walking along the barrier, motioning Rye to follow. They kept going until they reached the edge, near a tree. He whimpered when he walked from its cover and looked far behind him. Rye saw it when she left cover as well. Heidi was, again, hitting her head against the silverrod barrier. The links rattled each time she did. Wolfgang shuttered whenever they echoed.

Chapter 34

They could hear the rattling of loose silverwood just outside and above their den. The wind had picked up, dropping snow through the entrance and piling it along the ramp to the top. Some of the twoleg lights that adorned their den flickered whenever a strong gust came along. The moon was bright, but still defused behind the overcast. One of the war dogs stood at the entrance trying to eat the fresh snowflakes the wind blew inside. The other two lay on opposite sides of the den against the walls. One had her eyes fixed on the entrance. The other rested her head in her crossed paws, every attempt to close her eyes failed by the clapping of the first's jaw.

"Can you be a little less *you* tonight?" Juta snapped.

"Catching the snowflakes is good luck," Dona whimpered. "Each one you catch—"

"Seriously." Juta pointed to Karin, who was still fixed on the entrance.

Dona's ears flattened. "Fine. But we're missing out on all the luck."

She walked deeper into the den, licking some of the snow from the floor before sitting against the back wall. Before she could get comfortable, Karin's ears perked up. She stood at attention, almost leaping up the ramp and out the den. She was tempered when she saw the odd eyes of the cat riding on her companion. Backing away and whimpering, she returned to her spot. Rye leapt from Wolfgang's shoulders, and he immediately headed for the back of the den.

"Haaaaail, Wolfgang!" Dona said. "We didn't know how long it'd take to find the kitten, so we left your rabbit in the corner."

She pointed to the kill in the corner, still fresh. Its eyes were closed and its legs were bent to look like it was lying down with its head

resting on its crossed forelegs.

"I really missed you, so I bent it to make it look like you. It says just as little, but it's not the same."

"I assure you she didn't do anything to it," Juta said. "I watched it. Enjoy, outside."

Wolfgang glanced at it, sitting upright without taking it. The others looked back at him, waiting for him to lie down. He had their full attention when he did not. Rye sat in front of him.

"Aren't you going to lie down?" Dona said. "You always do that."

He shook his head, attention focused on Karin.

"We found Heidi," Rye said.

Karin leapt in front of her.

"Where?"

"There are long rods sticking out from the river far east of the bridge. She was trying to dig under a silverrod barrier to cross the twoleg's platform into Shadow territory."

"Juta shook her head. "It's a system they use to inspect the water. It's locked up to keep even masters out. No way she's going to get through."

"Is she still there?" Karin barked. "Tell me she's still there!"

"She was there when we left," Rye said.

Juta scoffed. "Well, at least you running off did something productive."

"And I think I we can approach and calm her down."

"And you go right back at it." Juta walked over to the she-kit. Most of her features were hidden when she blocked a light. "I thought I made it clear this morning. Stay out of this."

Karin barked. "But she found Heidi. Now we can go get her."

"We're not going anywhere. I say let her be this time. She clearly needs some extra space."

"We are *not* leaving her out there."

"You remember what happened last time?"

Dona whined when the two growled at each other, shrinking deeper into the corner with the rabbit. Wolfgang barked, taking their attention.

"What is with you tonight?" Juta said.

He pointed at the kit.

"What about her?"

Wolfgang rested a paw on her head, tapping it with his claw. Juta shook her head. He did it again, standing over her and presenting his shoulder. Karin looked away. Juta froze. He removed his paw from Rye's head, his shoulder already facing Dona. She shrieked away, throwing the rabbit aside. Wolfgang shook his head and approached slowly, waiting for her to stop whimpering. Pushed as far back as she could go, she finally leaned close and put a paw on his shoulder. When she pushed aside his fur, she was fixed on his scars for a few heartbeats. The others watched both of their expressions soften. Dona took a deep breath, her tail wagging.

"It really works?" she said. "Just looking at them?"

Wolfgang nodded.

"That wasn't so bad." Dona bounced from the corner and in front of the others. "I'm in! Show us the way, kitten."

"You have *got* to be joking," Juta said.

Wolfgang shook his head.

"If it eases Wolfgang, I want to try it," Karin said.

"You know what happens when Dona accidently mentions them. Let alone any of us."

"It's time to help her past this. For good."

"It's too dangerous—"

"No, Juta!" Karin barked. "I'm tired of... of killing birds and having nightmares. I don't want to keep going like this."

Juta stepped closer. "Karin—"

"No! I don't have to listen to you. Heidi is out there somewhere. Our litter in arms. Our *friend*, Juta. Remember when she was our friend?"

"She never stopped being one."

"I can't get over this until she does. You aren't the alpha. You can't stop me. I'm going with or without you!"

"Excuse me," Rye mewed.

"What, kitten, what!?" Juta barked.

Rye's ears flattened. Before she could recoil behind Wolfgang's paw, he slid her forward. Dona moved out of the way, and they surrounded the she-kit. Karin's breathing was short, constantly glancing at the den's entrance. Juta was calming herself. Wolfgang finally took his seat at the back of the den, resting his head on his paws but keeping his attention on the others. Rye's ears dropped as her eyes glanced over each of them.

"Don't look at us like that," Juta growled. "You don't get to feel sorry for us. You don't know what happened."

"Then *tell her*," Karin barked. "She's been here for almost a moon. And, whether you like it or not, she's a part of this now. I don't care what happens when we confront her. Heidi can only take our lives if it comes to that."

"Then it's a win-win,"

Everyone looked at Dona.

"Right?"

Juta's ears shot up. For the first time, Dona's posture was perfectly straight. She was at attention, staring straight ahead at the flakes of snow that fell into the den. Moments later, she relaxed again and let her tongue flop out the side of her mouth. Juta slid over and rested a paw on her shoulder.

"I thought I told you not to say things like that," Juta whimpered.

"I never hear *you* whimper." Dona joined her.

Juta backed away from the others a bit, keeping her attention on Rye. "Fine, kitten. Don't say I didn't warn you if Heidi learns I've told you anything."

Dona bounced up. "Can I be excused? I don't like this story."

Juta shook her head. "Please shut up... You and Heidi fought, and she told you about some of the stuff during the war. There's a lot more to it that you don't know. Like how we knew some of the Axin Mess survivors, or went to *paris* before Clement was born. When you mentioned Solestar the night you arrived, she stormed off. When she talked with that Shadow group a couple days ago, she got really angry with us. We all have scars, and some of them are from her."

Wolfgang closed his eyes, his breathing steady. Dona sat close, brushing against him. Karin kept her ears perked, but kept her eyes on the entrance.

Juta kept her eyes down. "It was a little over five years ago. We wandered around for some time. Just Heidi, Karin, and me. Eventually, we happened on this area. Heidi liked that it was abandoned; She hates the ones who conquered our old masters. We followed the path of the rail machines north of here. We didn't think any cat clans would be left, and not in such numbers as the Shadows. They must've learned how to deal with dogs from the chaos of the war; pinned us by our ankles and threatened biting our

necks. They were stronger than they looked. But one of the ones who had my ankles looked weak. I spun around. And, in the seconds I was free, Heidi ordered me to free Karin. I didn't question her. I killed two of the cats that had Karin's neck and she freed herself. Before we could even look at Heidi, we were surrounded by dozens more. She could only say 'run' before her head was pushed to the ground. They shoved ashes in her face and piled on top of her. They were biting her, scratching, they raked her ankles and nose..."

Karin, for a few moments, gave Juta her full attention. A shared glance calmed both down. Juta took a deep breath.

"The bridge was the closest escape route we saw. The river was still poison, and debris blocked so many paths. Heidi was gone for three moons. We don't know what happened. She got herself free, somehow. But she had a deep gash under her vest. She walked with a harsh limp on her hind legs. Her fur was covered head to tail in dry blood. But her glare was as sharp as when she gave that order for us to run. She told us never to mention it again. We didn't."

"What about Clementstar?" Rye said. "Did they aid your rescue attempts?"

"Clement had just arrived during that time. We refused to leave what was to be UnderClan's territorial expansion without our leader. He was rallying and reorganizing the cats there, and our rescue attempts provided him three moons of distraction to do so. He was grateful enough to let us stay in the master's park he would no longer be patrolling. He even promised us a winter route to use if, for some reason, we ever wanted an in to Shadow territory. We protested, but Heidi wanted to rest. She didn't care if it was on clan territory. And we had stumbled upon Wolfgang and Dona shortly after she got back. Lifted her spirits for a while."

"We learned not to ask about what exactly happened," Dona whimpered. "We don't even know what the scar looks like under her vest. I want to see, though."

"No, you don't," Karin snapped. "When her vest is off and others see it, she is a devil. Alpha or not. Even now it's loose. We have to find

her before it falls off."

Juta sighed, looking towards the entrance with Karin. Dona was pushed against Wolfgang; he still had his eyes closed. Rye watched with them. The lights began to flicker again, briefly taking their attention. All of their ears perked up. The she-kit attempted to pinpoint what they swiveled in unison with. Karin growled and leapt at the ramp, kicking snow through the entrance and growling.

"Those damned machines!" she barked.

"They aren't supposed to be out this late," Dona whimpered. "Don't they know animals have to sleep, too?"

"The *sowjets*. They're the ones flying them. Heidi hates them. They set her off!"

Rye finally herd the feint whistle of the sky-monster over the wind. It flew directly overhead, the echo lingering. Juta was coaxing Karin back inside. She tried to keep her breathing under control. When Karin returned to the circle, she stayed out while the others were focused elsewhere. Rye glanced past the others. Her head was low, her posture shaky, and her tail dragged carelessly across the floor as a result. Catching glimpse of the cat, Juta growled. Her posture was straight again when she had the other's attention.

"I am... Has Heidi ever actually seen a dog in Shadow territory?" Rye said.

"There's never a dog," Juta sighed.

"There could be," Karin said.

"There's *never* a dog. Shadow territory is vast, but the clan are hundreds. Not even a war dog could move through unnoticed."

Dona nodded. "And just like that, we go from functioning pack to a group of fragile—"

"Don't *ever* call her that!" Karin barked. "She is *not* fragile."

Dona whimpered, resting on Wolfgang's shoulder.

"Every time this happens, Heidi gets headaches," Karin said. "She never sleeps well. Her nightmares come back. And so do mine... Last time really hurt when she attacked. It felt genuine. I want her back. The real Heidi."

"Then we'll just find a way to get her back," Juta said.

Dona bounced over and tried to lick her face, getting shoved away before she could. She spun around, nearly hitting Rye in the process.

"Yay!" she barked. "She's on our side, now."

"I was never against you," Juta said. "I just... thought letting her have her space would work this time."

"It's not working for any of us," Karin said.

"Then I say we leave the kitten here."

"What?" Rye said. "I want to see this through."

"Why? This still isn't your problem."

Wolfgang opened his eyes.

"It is my problem."

"A moon ago, you didn't even know who we were."

"Five moons ago, I did not know who Blackleaf was, either." Rye walked past Juta and stared at the night sky. The sky-monster's distant rumble followed its wake, and the snow continued to pile up the entrance ramp. "You are right. Heidi is not my kin, my branch, or even my species. She does not fall under my jurisdiction, and she cares little for the Covenant's mission. But she is afraid. And she is dangerous. If I were to attempt to assist Blackleaf now, I would not even know where to begin."

"And you're saying she's all of those things?" Karin said.

Rye shook her head. "Not directly. Bringing back the voice of

StarClan could have avoided this war, perhaps. She acts as if she is the only Shadow who cares. She should not have to fear for her life, or for the success of her own undertaking. But she does not have a choice. I do."

Juta relaxed her eyes. "So Heidi is practice for you. For your real goal."

The she-kit spun around. "Please, do not take it the wrong way. I cannot feel the pain that any of you suffer. I likely never will, given the circumstances of my birth. The knowledge of an Incarnate is passed to her by her branch. But her wisdom must be of her own making... at least, that is the way I see it. If I am merely a reincarnation of Rye, then I truly have no place beyond this clan war."

Rye nodded when the moon was visible, just for a heartbeat, between a crack in the overcast. The clouds quickly covered it, and a frigid gust of wind blew snow in her face. She turned around and shook it away; Juta was staring down at her. Wolfgang raised his head, ears sharp, Dona pressed against the side of his muzzle. Karin walked past both and resumed her lookout.

Juta sighed. "Good answer, kitten."

"My reason is ultimately self-serving." Rye kept her head down.

"At least you didn't lie to us. And you finally gave a reason for obsessing over that Shadow medicine cat... Just keep your head down if you decide to see this through."

"Who wouldn't obsess over that medicine cat." Dona's tail wagged. "Have you *seen* her? I bet every she-cat *wishes* they were a tom instead."

"And you're right back to being disgusting," Juta said. "It still beats you being serious, though. Going to need some humor before getting beaten down tomorrow."

"I pray it doesn't come to that," Karin whispered.

She kept her eyes attentively on the entrance. Wolfgang stood,

picking up the rabbit from the corner and eyeing Dona. She wagged her tail and nodded, pecking his muzzle with her own. He ignored it and left the den. Karin did not take her eyes from the sky. The snow dotted her fur as she let her body rest flat on the ramp. Juta walked over and set a paw on her back; it was quickly growled away. She went back to her spot against the wall and laid down, focused on the opposite side. Rye glanced at her while moving to the back corner. Her ears were folded at her sides, ignoring Dona's scratching at the walls. She kept her front paws close to her face, bundling herself. Her eyes were low and glossy.

Chapter 35

Whenever they leapt, they were sure to keep behind narrow tree trunks, waiting for a signal from whoever was in front to keep going. Their speed cleared dozens of trees in a few heartbeats. All of their ears were pressed against the sides of their heads. Their muzzles were straight, their noses constantly sniffing the air. Whichever of them were on the sides glanced behind them occasionally. The sun was blocked by the thick overcast, eliminating all of their shadows. Blackbirds watched from high overhead. Some perched in the bare trees, fluttering from branch to branch at the dog's pace. Others flew overhead, scattered and slow. Not one of them made a sound.

Rye gripped Wolfgang's fur with her claws. He did not even flinch when they occasionally scraped beneath his thick fur. His ears and muzzle were just as attentive as the rest of them. They leapt over large rocks and fallen trees, landing Karin in the lead. Her ears shot up; the others dropped to their bellies. Rye slid from Wolfgang's shoulder and hid next to him. Karin sniffed the air, snapping her mouth silently upward. She turned to Juta and nodded. Both leapt from their spots and deeper into the forest. Dona and Wolfgang followed. Rye hopped over the tree and ran next to the large war dog, fighting to keep up. The absence of ground growth and shallow snow left them free to bound through the forest at their top pace. The trees seemed to close in around them a bit. They never backed off, weaving past each one. Even the blackbirds had trouble focusing on the pack through the canopy. Some flocked ahead, circling. They leapt through a bare thicket and stopped in a clearing.

Karin pointed her muzzle forward.

The others nodded. Rye, panting, nodded eventually.

Fewer birds followed into the clearing. It was massive, the trees removed and the ground paved over by smooth gray-stone. The dogs slowly padded onto it side-by-side. They walked under the red

and white bands that wrapped across and around some of the closest trees. The gray-stone went all the way down the sides of the clearing, far out of view for any of them. They were careful to check for twolegs. Juta sniffed behind her and nodded. The group approached two massive triangular pillars many times taller than a twoleg nest. They were made of bronzewood but glistened like silverwood, damp from the snow. Each was adorned with a gold twoleg symbol: two tools, one blunt and one sharp, crossed at the middle. Red squares of fake-fur were flown on poles, the same gold symbol in the corner of each. A wide patch of snow-covered grass separated the gray-stone down the middle and extended just as far out of view. In front of each pillar was a large, black statue of a kneeling twoleg warrior. The faces lacked detail, even as the group drew closer. The statues were placed to look down at whatever stood in front of them.

Heidi sat close enough to the stand that she had to look straight up to see one of the statue's faces. Her fur was dotted in snow; Rye caught its unwashed scent. Her vest had slid from her shoulders and was wrapped around her belly. One of the straps that pinned it to her chest was loose. Occasionally she would growl and twitch, snapping right back to the statue when it was over. Her tail was buried. As the group approached, Karin stopped when she focused on the vest. She started panting, and her legs started to shake. Juta rested a paw on her shoulder; Karin did not move. She planted her paws when she heard Heidi growl again. Only when Juta started pushing did she walk again. Dona and Wolfgang were a few steps behind the others. Rye stayed next to them.

Heidi looked back at them. The group stopped.

"H-Heidi?" Karin whimpered.

She went back to looking at the statue's face. Karin padded forward, slowly, stopping out of attack range behind her. The others glanced around for a while. Satisfied with what they saw, they kept a close eye on Heidi's shoulders.

"Were so, so worried about you," Karin said. "You usually—"

"Quiet today," Heidi whispered.

The others stopped again, a tree-length from their alpha.

"It is quiet today," Juta said.

They resumed their approach.

Heidi nodded. "The masters closed it... I can pray alone."

"Would you like us to join—"

"It happens just a few times per year. It is so relaxing when it does."

Juta motioned Rye to stay behind her.

"I see you brought the kitten," Heidi whispered.

"We have to watch her," Dona said.

"Oh?"

Dona froze.

"I've only heard you so serious a few times."

She began whimpering.

"Something's different this time, isn't it?"

Juta nudged Dona to keep going. Rye stayed further behind them. They broke off and moved in a semi-circle around Heidi, each staying out of lunging range. Dona and Wolfgang sat furthest to the sides, constantly glancing around. They dug their paws into the snow to grip the gray-stone underneath, tense and ready to leap. Karin and Juta were in the center, looking at the scars that covered Heidi's shoulders. The snow did nothing to hide them. Her tail shot up underneath; the pack tensed up. She growled again, but relaxed a heartbeat later. The others did not.

"Why are you here?" Heidi said.

"We're worried about you," Karin said.

"You're always worried." Heidi's tone was sharper.

"Well, we're extra worried this time." Juta's voice tensed up.

"Don't tell me it's because of the kitten."

"No, it's because of you running off. Again. And us having to find you. *Again*."

"Your frustration is showing," Heidi growled.

Juta whimpered, dropping her head and averting her eyes.

"No. You came here for a reason. So, let's hear it."

She shied further away at first, wrapping her tail between her legs when she stood. Dona's head dropped as well. It began to snow. The lack of wind made each flake rest softly on whatever it landed on. What few blackbirds remained perched wherever there was space in the carved grooves and top of the pillar, never less than a tree-length from the dogs. Rye stepped closer, though. Juta snapped from her fear, trying to drag the she-kit back to her side to no avail.

"You have something to say now, kitten?" Heidi turned her head; the scar that ran from her eye down was more prominent with her vest moved. "Because this doesn't concern you."

"The others told me that," Rye said. "But it concerns me now. Now that I am held captive."

Heidi turned back towards the statue. "You know what? If you want to leave, fine. Leave."

The others' ears perked up, as did Rye's.

"You heard me. You're free to go join Clement and that ugly war. I won't stop you anymore."

Rye pawed at the snow. "Why not?"

Heidi growled. "I don't know which one of you talked the others into this, but I'd rather go back on my word than be disturbed. If letting you go takes one of you out of... whatever this is, so be it. Just give me some time alone, and—"

"That's not good enough anymore." Juta stepped forward again, sitting beside Rye.

"What?" Heidi growled.

"Maybe you do need to be disturbed. Because I... I don't want to do this with you again. You're my alpha, and my friend. We're closer than kin. And I don't want to keep watching you do this to yourself."

"What exactly is 'this'?"

"There's never a dog, Heidi. We all know it, but none of us say anything."

"I see."

"And then we just... argue. With you, with each other when you're gone. Worse yet, we've fought you multiple times. We get hurt from it. We can't even mention Solestar without you getting upset. I'm just... tired of doing this. Don't you think?"

Heidi dropped her head, looking at the base of the statue. Her muscles tensed up a bit; the others held their spots, not even shaking the snow from their fur. Rye watched her vest slide a bit down her belly. The strap that held it to her chest flapped to the side, the ring holding it together missing. The blackbirds continued to watch, more perching on the opposite pillar.

Heidi took a deep breath. "What now?"

Juta's ear twitched. "What do you mean?"

"You can't just expect me to go back with you."

"Why not?" Karin growled, standing.

Heidi glared at her, keeping her body calm. The others flinched, but held their ground. Karin snapped from it, shaking her head and barking.

"This isn't fair. You don't get to keep doing this."

"What are you accusing me of?"

"Of this! Of all this."

"The kitten's free to go. It's over—"

"No, it's not!"

Heidi's head dropped. She growled again.

"Growl all you want. This isn't fair!" Karin smacked snow onto her, dropping the vest even further. "Every time you run off like this, you hurt yourself. I worry. I snap at Juta, I'm short with Dona, I ignore Wolfgang. I keep my nose to the den's entrance, waiting for you. When we find us, you claim you couldn't save the dog. The *imaginary* dog. You know who that imaginary dog is? You!"

"Watch your mouth—"

"Why should I? We fight *every time* we find you after you run off. It always hurts us. You almost *killed me* last time. I had to fight for my life, against *you*! And then you just, just pretend like nothing happened at the end. 'Don't say Solestar', 'don't mention the scars', 'don't speak of the war'. Well it all happened. We *all* lived through it. We *all* served the masters. Some of us killed for them. We still have nightmares. I, don't, want to, anymore!"

Heidi began shaking. "Why now?" Her voice lost composure.

"Because you're our alpha!" Karin kicked more snow at Heidi. "You *have* to be first. You've been through more than all of us. If you can make peace, then so can we."

"Is that what this is all about?"

"*Yes*! It's important to me. I don't like being in pain. I don't want to cause it. I don't want to watch it. And I'm not doing this, again. I won't attack you."

"I won't if you just leave me alone—"

"You need to face this."

Karin planted her paws in the snow, baring her teeth at her alpha. Heidi raised her head and glanced at Wolfgang to her left. He was looking down, but his eyes were focused. He let the snow cover his unkempt fur. To her right sat Dona, whose tongue was out.

"You have something stupid to say, don't you," Heidi said.

Dona nodded. "If you won't come back for us, do it for the kitten."

"I'm starting to think the kitten had more to do with this than she should've."

"I-I swear, it was all us—"

"Because none of you have *ever* defied me so. Your alpha."

Dona took a few steps back.

"I'll give you all one last chance." Heidi slowly, carefully, faced Dona. "Go back to the den. Damnit just leave me alone."

The others had stood, taking steps back. All but Karin, who kept her paws in the snow and shook her head. She held her head up and exposed her neck to the others. The snow began falling harder, blocking out distant objects and forcing some of the blackbirds from their places on the pillar. The fake-fur baring the twoleg's symbol was shrouded from view. Rye could hardly make out the small *SS* on Heidi's vest, but she slid even closer. When she lifted her paw and set it down, the subtle slosh it perked Heidi's ears. She jumped to Dona. Dona sidestepped and rolled over. When she got up, Heidi spun around and kicked her in the nose. She went down, gripping it.

The others began whimpering, closing their distance with a step every few heartbeats. Karin still kept her neck exposed, opening her eyes to look on at her shaking leader. Heidi failed to grab the vest before it fell from her belly. She even kept her leg up, petrified by the sight of it lying in the snow. The odor of the flattened, unwashed fur underneath quickly faded; some of the blackbirds flew higher up the pillar. The snow had barely touched it, leaving everything in full view. Rye's eyes went wide, and she blankly

stared at the war dog's chest. Large parts were furless, the result of thick scars running across it. The bald patches made Heidi shiver when it was fully exposed. Many parts of her brown and black pelt were dotted with gray hairs. One deep-pink claw wound ran from the bottom of her neck, across the left side of her body, and behind her tail. There was still red underneath the pink scar; Rye thought she could smell the blood. The sight of the flesh finally pushed her back, stopping next to Juta. Heidi's tail briefly shook as she struggled to keep her breathing under control. Rye saw the scar continued across the back of both her thighs and between her hind legs.

"Stars above," Rye whispered.

"Oh no," Dona whimpered.

Heidi's eyes darted to her.

"I'm sorry!" She collapsed.

The war dog lunged at her huddled body before being tackled by Juta and Wolfgang. Rye shuffled out of the way, watching the three tumble against the statue's base. Heidi jumped up and kicked Juta in the head. She pressed down on Wolfgang's chest. He thrust himself forward and pushed her off, lifting Juta to her paws.

Rye jumped back again when Heidi leapt in her direction. Her head was low, growling at the other two.

"Karin!" Juta barked. "We need help."

Karin kept her neck exposed, turning away from the fight.

"You know what she's capable of—"

A paw snapped into Juta's chest and reared her up against the statue's base. Heidi smacked her repeatedly in the belly before she slid out of the way. Dona lifted her head long enough to see Juta dragged away by the tail. Wolfgang jumped on Heidi's back and wrapped his jaws around her neck. She threw her shoulder forward and flipped the larger dog over her and on his back, kicking him in the eye.

Juta staggered to her paws but was lifted by her neck against the base. Heidi reared up to take her paws off the ground; Juta flailed about and scratched at Heidi. Rye watched Juta's eyes grow wider as she was held tighter. Heidi's jaws flexed. Her eyes were nearly shut. But she tossed the war dog away and caught Wolfgang's lunge before it tackled her. They slid back, but Heidi reared up to match his grapple. She pushed her head against his neck and threw him aside. When he hit the ground, she stomped on his belly. He rolled to his side, hacking and whimpering.

Dona rolled out of the way when Heidi lunged at her again. Her ears were erect and twitched at the slightest movements her alpha made. She dodged two more lunges before tripping and curling up.

"Can't we just go back to normal!?" she cried.

Heidi struck her head and chest over and over. The war dog curled into a tighter ball and absorbed each blow. When she was perfectly still, Heidi faced Rye.

Rye backed away; Heidi lunged. She was tackled mid-air by Wolfgang and Juta. Wolfgang rolled with her and continued coughing when he kicked her away. Juta pressed herself against Heidi's back before she could stand. She pushed her muzzle onto Heidi's forehead. It wasn't enough. The alpha smacked Juta's jaw with her forehead. She let go and was rolled over. Heidi kicked her chest. Juta whimpered. She kicked it again. Juta screamed, eyes shooting wide open. Karin's defiance faltered a bit when she heard her friend's pain. Her muzzle was pressed closed with one paw while the other clawed at the back of her neck.

Wolfgang slammed into her, tackling her and again having her neck in his jaws. Heidi ran to the statue and dragged him along. Both were thrown into its base. Wolfgang's head slammed against it. He slid from her shoulders and took several steps away before collapsing.

"Karin," Rye said.

Karin still had her neck exposed. Her eyes were fixed on Heidi, who returned the stare. Karin didn't flinch when her alpha charged. She

was lifted into the air by her neck. Heidi balanced on her hind paws and bit down harder to get her as high as she could. Karin was slammed onto her back, a paw pressed into her chest before she could cry out.

"I'm not... doing this again," Karin whimpered.

Heidi pushed the paw against her neck instead. The gurgle Karin made snapped Rye into jumping on the alpha's back. Ignored at first, Rye scratched the back of her neck and forced her to let go of Karin. She jumped off and towards the statue's base before Heidi could throw her off. She dug her paw into the snow, managing to bury it. She nodded.

The alpha's beady eyes were solely on the she-kit. In two leaps she closed the distance. Rye ducked under Heidi by sliding through the deeper snow, springing up and scratching her ankles. Heidi turned to snap, and she jumped between her legs. Rye was on her back, scratching at the war-dog's thick belly fur. Before being kicked away she rolled from underneath and scratched her side. Heidi turned and barked directly in her right ear; the ringing stopped Rye cold. The war dog picked her up and tossed her into the base.

Rye stood and rolled out of the way of another charge. She growled and leapt into the air on one of her front and rear paws. She spun and scratched, gracefully switching legs and spinning to scratch again. Both hits were deflected from Heidi's shoulder; she had kept her head out of reach. Rye jumped back when she landed, but Heidi lunged forward and bit her chest. She screamed and slashed the alpha's muzzle. But she never let go. Rye was thrashed about. Teeth bore deeper into her chest, the screaming hurting her own ears. Heidi tossed her into the base of the statue. She let the she-kit press her paw against her new wound and her muzzle into the snow to quiet herself. She shook her head when she felt her blood ooze onto her fur. She ran her paw over each puncture and kept her eyes firmly on the war dog.

Heidi's eyes were wide. She was focused on the others. Her muzzle was red, as was one of her hind paws. She brushed her muzzle and sniffed the blood that rubbed onto her paw. The scent even lingered Rye's way. It overpowered her own; she glanced at Juta. She was no

longer lying in the snow.

"Dona, carry Wolfgang until he wakes up," Karin said.

"I don't want to," Dona whimpered. "Heidi's still—"

"Dona, *please.* I'll cover you."

"O-Okay. If you say it's safe..."

Dona limped towards Wolfgang, keeping pressure off her chest. The war dog stirred in his unconsciousness, even as Dona slid herself underneath and lifted him onto her shoulders. She bared her teeth and shut her eyes.

"Please keep me safe!" she cried, shuffling towards the bare trees.

"You're safe, Dona. Just don't stop."

A pair of jaws snatched her up. Juta was panting, holding back her whimpers when she slung the she-kit onto her back. Rye took a deep breath, gripping Juta's shoulders while keeping her chest against her back. The war dog began limping towards the trees. She looked back every few steps.

Dona had already entered the bare thicket, some of the blackbirds following above. Juta turned around.

"Karin, let's go!"

The two war dogs stared each other down. Karin was backing away from the right of the pillar and towards the others. Her hind paw tapped something; Heidi's vest was lying in the snow, flung far from where it originally fell off. The alpha was still, just looking at it, before turning around and sitting to hide her large scar. She whimpered a bit and shook her head. Karin's ears fell. She grabbed the vest in her jaw. But when she turned around to follow Juta, Rye saw her wide eyes and her shallow breaths. Her walk turned into a run when she caught up to Juta, passing her and heading into the forest.

"Karin, where are you going?" Juta yelled. "We need what's in that

vest for the kitten. She's bleeding."

She was already gone. Wolfgang and Dona were out of sight as well. Juta shook her head and barked, holding back the flinches she made each time she moved her chest.

"Is she following us?" Juta grunted.

Rye glanced back; Heidi was facing away from the twoleg statue. The remaining blackbirds were leaving.

"No."

"You let me know the moment she is behind us. Or we're dead."

Juta continued limping into the thicket, slowing her pace again and grunting through it. Rye kept her claws on the war dog's shoulders to keep from moving around too much and aggravating both of their injuries.

"What happened? Why was it so hard?"

"Just concentrate on staying still, kitten. I'm not sure if I'm going to even make it back."

Rye pressed her head against Juta's neck and kept herself motionless. Her tail carelessly slid around. She was careful to keep her hind legs away from the war dog's sides, pressing them against the side of her chest closest to her underarms. Her ears folded back against Juta's moans, especially when she had to turn around a tree. And she kept her lookout; Heidi was nowhere near them.

Chapter 36

The snowfall was heavy, blocking out the evening sun. The horizon was a mess of clashing shades that failed to gain the attention of anyone. The twoleg nests along it were gone. The bridge and river's banks were hidden. Even the destroyed structures on the other side seemed further away, nothing but grays and browns. Despite the clouds, there was hardly any wind. It allowed the pair to find their way back towards the hole in the ground that was their den. The blackbirds were long gone, and they could no longer spot the UnderClan cats in the distance. The war dog grunted with each step she took closer to the entrance, her paws carelessly kicking up snow and making noise. She shivered and whined, and never walked in a straight line. Her tail was halfway between her legs. And her eyes never once looked up. The she-kit on her back was still pressed against her, claws gripping her shoulders in the same spot as when she got on. She left them covered in small amounts of blood. When the war dog made her way to the hole, she looked behind her one last time, lingering on the expanse of short hills sparce with trees and no signs of movement.

"Juta, is that you?" A voice called from within. "Is Rye still with you?"

Rye gripped even harder when Juta went down; one step was too much for her. She tumbled over her head and down the ramp of snow, sliding in front of the rest of the pack.

"Juta!"

She screamed, splaying out her hind paws and holding her front ones close. The lights in the den flickered more than usual, barely giving the others enough light to see the black spot below her chest when they parted her fur. Juta snapped at them, but a paw gently rubbed her muzzle.

"It's me, it's me," Karin said. "We all made it back."

Dona lifted Rye by her scruff and dragged her away. Her chest was red.

"What do I do about this?" Dona's voice was broken.

"Wolfgang, wrap her up. I need to tend to Juta."

Wolfgang slowly padded to Rye; she barely looked up at him. The underside of his eyes were black and his nose was stained with his own blood. His forehead had a few new claw marks on it. He reached for the vest that Rye was dragged near, nosing through one of the bags and pulling out a roll of fake-fur. He pushed Rye onto her back and began licking the blood from her chest.

"That is... Heidi's vest," Rye said.

"It's because she's really gone this time!" Juta barked.

Dona jumped over to hold down her shoulder while Karin pushed aside more of her belly fur to see the extent of her bruise. Her ears fell the more she ran her paw across her friend.

"Get away from me!" Juta cried.

"You have a few fractured ribs. Broken, maybe—"

"I don't care, just leave me alone."

"I'm not doing that."

"Why not!?"

"Because you're all I have left!"

Karin gently pressed her muzzle against Juta's chest; she immediately calmed down, Dona lifting her paw away. Even Wolfgang and Rye looked over.

"So, you think she's gone, too?" Juta said.

"It was worse than last time," Karin whimpered. "She didn't even care it was us."

"You don't believe that."

Karin lifted her muzzle, staring at the den's entrance.

"Okay, then what do we do now? Appoint a new alpha?"

"Never!"

Karin wrapped her paw around Juta's neck. She recoiled a bit at having to move, but she did not move. The snow still came down through the entrance. Dona helped Karin move Juta deeper into the den, until they were both out of it and under the one good light. Wolfgang began wrapping Rye with the fake-fur, pressing it tight against her chest and around her neck. She felt her pain ease a bit when it was pulled snug. The war dog glanced up and nodded.

"Seems your injuries look worse than they are, kitten," Juta moaned. "That's good, at least."

"Try not to move," Karin said.

"Can we even treat it?" Dona whimpered. "I thought only masters could treat broken bones."

"Going to the masters means dissolving the pack. They'd never let us return here."

Rye sat up. "Cats wrap injuries with cobwebs and sticks to treat them. If not that, comfrey is the next best thing."

"Whatever that is, it probably doesn't grow here," Juta moaned. "Besides, there aren't enough cobwebs or roots in that whole forest to treat something like this. Even during the summer."

"Don't speak like that," Karin barked. "You're going to recover from this. Give me the wrap."

Wolfgang tossed it over. Karin looked at it for a while, motioning Dona to lift the injured war dog. She pushed the wrap under her chest and picked it up from the other side. Juta whimpered when Dona put her down.

"Damn. It's going to take the rest of it to cover her belly."

Rye glanced at the vest, laying against one of the walls.

"You can use that," she said.

The others glanced at the vest. Karin's ears flattened.

"If it is fixed, it will compress her belly in the right places—"

"It's Heidi's vest," Juta growled.

Rye opened her mouth, but nothing came of it. She dropped her head and looked away from it. When she rolled over, she jumped to her paws to avoid the sting of laying on her injury. Wolfgang shifted the end of the wrap around her back to make sure it was tight. The others were still looking at the vest. More snow collapsed into the den, nearly coming up to the light closest to it. It flickered out. Dona whimpered and sniffed the air as the wind whistled even harder, less space for it to get through the entrance. The snowfall was still too thick to see the clouds; Karin kept her eyes on the evening sky without leaving Juta's side. Hardly any natural light managed to get into the den. What little did was lost to the ambience of the twoleg lights.

"Aren't you going to treat your injuries?" Juta said.

"Me and Dona were just scratched up a bit," Karin said. "Wolfgang has a lump on his head."

"You were lifted up. I thought you were dead."

Karin ran the top of her foreleg over her neck.

"I'll be fine."

Dona nudged her, a line of fake-fur still under Juta and ready to be wrapped. Karin shook her head, stroking the injured war dog and occasionally breaking her watch on the entrance to look at her bruised belly. She tried to lift herself up, but she just whimpered through her nose and laid back down. Her brow curled and softened as her friend continued to stroke her. The snow had begun to pile in

the shallow gutters along the wall. More was kicked inside. All of the war dog's ears faced the entrance. The blur took a few steps down the ramp, stopping for a while and taking a deep breath. Rye stood; Wolfgang dragged her back when he saw who it was. Heidi kept her balance against the fresh snowfall all the way to the new base of the ramp. Karin was moving Juta back, standing in front of her when they were halfway inside. Heidi kept her attention between each of the war dogs. Her muzzle was still ringed with dry blood. Rye uncurled her nose; the scent of her unwashed fur was gone. The areas around the scars had fresh scratches on them wherever her claws could reach. She never tried to move further into the den, letting the snow and wind continue to wear her down. Despite her sagging posture, she did not sit, either.

"There's something you should've known about me. From the moment it happened."

Heidi's breathy voice sent shivers throughout Rye's body.

"That day, when I was captured by the Shadows, seeing you escape kept me strong... for a while. I was kept on a chain, with a metal collar. One of the buildings in their territory had one, specifically for pet dogs. If I howled, they beat me. I was never fed. If I wanted water, I had to suck it out of the mud around me. The post in the ground I was chained to was too deep and too tough. After a moon, I stopped trying to escape. They watched me whimper, relieve myself, and lick mud. They laughed, scratched me. The young ones would play games on who would get the closest to me, mocking the first to run whenever I glanced at them. But I had already given up. When I was too weak to stand, Solestar herself visited me. She gave me this scar."

Heidi ran her forepaw along her muzzle, pointing to the large one that went to her tail.

"She-She really had to dig her claws in. My fur was thick, even in summer. She took her time. Told me my pack had abandoned me. She said if they ever saw me, they would run scared for their own lives. She put my vest back on when she was done. Even some of her warriors were uncomfortable watching it. I just whimpered the whole time. It was humiliating... I saw our masters torture others.

Sometimes, captives were sent to dark camps where they'd never be seen again. Shoot a member of a captive group to get the others to talk—they never did. I have killed their enemies. I thought I could put that all behind me when the war was lost and our masters were conquered. If Solestar was capable of being as cruel as the masters, then where was I supposed to go? Where would I ever be able to rest? I figured if I was going to rest, I would shut my eyes and let a rainy day sink me into the mud. That rainy day came and loosened my collar. The mud had finally worn the latch loose. The very second it broke, I ran for the bridge. Some of the Shadows saw me, but never chased. Even their bridge patrol did not stop me. I tore muscles between my legs I was so weak. I nearly killed UnderClan warriors who intercepted me. And I told you never to mention it again."

Heidi dropped her head, keeping her eyes from the others.

"I ran around all day. I figured if I was too weak to seek shelter, the cold would take me. I could finally rest. But that didn't happen. I have to face what I've done, and what I haven't done."

She took a moment, choking up and shivering. Rye glanced at the others. They were still cautious, but relaxed their postures.

"Rye, I want you gone. Back to your territory, to UnderClan's camp, I don't care. Juta, you're the new alpha. I am no longer fit to lead... I haven't been for a long time."

"You can't step down," Juta said.

She lifted her head and slid herself around to get a better view. Karin stepped from in front of her.

"I..." Karin kept her head down. "I don't want you to step down, either."

Dona was wide-eyed, keeping to the back of the den. Wolfgang pointed his nose to the vest. Rye stood and walked towards it, fighting to keep her legs still. The tight wraps helped ease her breathing against her wounds. She gripped the vest in her mouth; it still reeked of Heidi's scent. Dragging it to the center, Heidi took a

few steps back into the ramp. She still let snow cover her fur. And she would not let herself look at the vest.

"It isn't just about who leads," Juta groaned. "You're our friend."

"I broke something, didn't I?" Heidi whimpered.

"You've been with me since we were born. I know you didn't—"

"But I did mean it. I meant every kick, every bite and scratch. I just wanted you gone."

Juta looked away. "Well, the pack wouldn't be the same without you in charge."

Heidi focused on Karin.

"As long as we understand each other," Karin said.

"I can't hurt you if I'm not alpha," Heidi whimpered.

"Not being around is what messes with us. You've said what we all wanted to hear for a long time."

She approached; Heidi stepped back. She nearly jumped forward to embrace her alpha. The dried blood in Karin's fur made Heidi's ears drop. She closed her eyes and let herself finally move from the cold of the falling snow. Juta sniffed towards the pair, nodding. Heidi could not break free before Dona bounced over and stared at her large scar.

"It's just like Wolfgang recommended," Dona said. "It really does work."

Heidi slid herself from Karin and looked at Wolfgang and Rye, lingering on the wraps around Rye's chest.

"I'm sorry you had to be involved, kitten," Heidi said.

Again, Rye held back her words, nodding instead.

Heidi walked past Wolfgang and towards the end of the den,

shaking the snow from her fur and dropping onto the ground. She faced the back wall, keeping her head against the floor and laying on her right to display her large scar. Her breathing was deep but deliberate, not letting any of her muscles flex. Karin returned to Juta's side, leaving Dona to part some of the snow at the entrance with her tail. Wolfgang was focused on the vest.

"Last chance," Heidi said. "I can leave without protest."

"Then who would I usurp if you leave?" Dona whimpered.

The others glanced at her. Heidi looked back for a moment at the energetic war dog before returning to the back wall.

"You have to wear my vest, Juta. It can still be tightened. And it will be better at treating any fractures or broken bones than the wraps."

Wolfgang carried the vest over to Juta, who sat up as much as she could to let him drag it underneath her.

"First thing tomorrow morning, we leave the den. We will sleep in the unused buildings above UnderClan's camp. I don't want Juta to have to climb up and down this ramp. If she doesn't sleep here, none of us do."

The others nodded.

"Would Clementstar allow such a thing?" Rye said.

"That doesn't matter right now... Do you still plan on joining him?"

"Whether my branch knows I live or not, I came to this side for a reason."

Heidi nodded. "One always stays with Juta, and one always helps me hunt. Without the vest, I can't carry as much."

The others nodded.

"And one more thing... I'm sorry. I don't want my actions to go unpunished."

Lifting an ear to the others, she heard nothing. When she rested her head towards the wall again, Karin and Wolfgang began wrapping the vest around Juta. She winced and groaned whenever they pushed a strap tight against her body. Wolfgang held a paw to her chest to hold the vest in place while Karin looped the hide straps through the silver rings. Rye watched the straps get pulled tight multiple times. Juta kept as quiet as she could, but her face cringed every time they touched her side. She caught glimpse of the she-kit and quickly looked away. Rye turned her attention to the entrance, resting on her side to keep pressure off her chest. The snow was still falling hard, further filling it up. Dona was trying to brush away the imprints Heidi's paws left. She stopped to scratch her fur and glance between the sky and her alpha. Her ears dropped moments after getting to her; Heidi was shivering.

Chapter 37

When she reached her paw out, it ran through fur. She kept brushing it, leaning closer and rubbing her head against it.

"... adorable when it's dreaming."

Her eyes shot open. Two black, beady eyes were staring right back at her. Dona's tongue hung from her mouth, and the pep had returned to her flinches. The den was nearly dark, a couple of the twoleg lights snuffed out by the wind. Snow had piled further inside. It overshot the gutters and managed to make it all the way to the back without melting. The heat the den had stored from the war dogs was quickly fading, as was the scent. She felt cold under her paws inside for the first time. The way out was far past the point of being a ramp and approached being snowed in. Barely any light from the night sky made it through the overcast and snowfall, aside from the twoleg lights that shined behind the dozens of eyes staring around the entrance. Their ears swiveled about. Sometimes they glanced in other directions, but most never took their eyes from the dark tom that was halfway down the ramp. He could barely keep himself above the fresh snow, his legs nearly submerged and his head arched up to keep his chin out of it. Rye got to her feet and nearly fell. The pain from her chest stung in the cold, even with the fake-fur wraps tightly covering it. The other war dogs were near the back – aside from Dona – ears and muzzles straight and forward, even Juta. Their muscles flexed each time the tom made any movement. Heidi was at the new base of the ramp, looking at him and nodding occasionally. Rye shook herself free of the snow and stretched.

"So that's it?" Heidi said.

"He relays it isn't personal." The tom muffled his voice and kept his profile narrow.

"I'm just surprised. I didn't think we'd ever be surrounded like this."

"Wait, we are under siege!?" Rye yelled.

"I know, right?" Dona said. "It's just like when all those ships surrounded ours! That's how I got back to land. Last time I got some jerky, though. I wish they had some."

Heidi turned around. "It's nothing serious. They demand you, kitten."

"Oh," Rye mewed.

"This isn't your fault. I guess Clement didn't want to wait for me to stop being selfish."

"Are there... any terms?"

"No. They're just here for you, given your prior agreement to help them. But it must be getting bad over there if he's willing to resort to this. You did still plan on going, right?"

Rye nodded.

"I still don't like it." Juta kept her voice low. "He knew we were all tired and injured. It's disheartening, to say the least."

"A bunch of fluffy cats took us in our sleep!" Dona barked. "I thought you were our strategist."

"Oh, shut up," Juta growled.

Heidi faced the tom. "If it makes you feel any better, we didn't lose a fight. They're just collecting a due that was never mine to deny... Tom, I'd like a few moments to speak with her."

He nodded.

"With just the pack."

The tom narrowed his eyes, but shuffled through the snow and out of the den. He shook himself clean and darted away, the eyes of the others vanishing with him. Heidi looked at the overcast for a moment, taking a few deep breaths and closing her eyes. The others relaxed, moving behind Rye and sitting in the same line. Juta stayed on her paws; she winced several times before giving up on sitting, clamping her jaw shut against the whimpers.

"How bad does it hurt?" Heidi said, turning around.

"I'll live," Juta grunted.

The wind picked up again, sprinkling more snow down the entrance. Dona resisted the urge to approach it, keeping herself attentive. The lights flickered on and off each time the wind howled. The others glanced around when the den grew dark, leaving just the surface light to illuminate Heidi. She shivered, and sighed, bundling herself close and keeping her head against her neck to hide the scar a bit.

"I just want to know whose idea it was to confront me so directly," Heidi said.

The others glanced at Wolfgang, who held his head up. Her eyes widened.

"You!?"

Her ears dropped when he pointed at Rye.

"And you," she sighed. "Why you?"

Rye looked away.

Heidi shook her head. "No, no, I didn't mean it like that... They told you what I could do if I let myself go, didn't they?"

The she-kit nodded.

"Why try and fight? You could not possibly help them subdue me."

"That is not... I believe it is not true," Rye said.

Karin's ears flattened when the alpha looked her way.

"Right... I would've killed her," Heidi whimpered.

"And it was not just that," Rye mewed.

Juta glanced at her, nodding. The others tensed up.

"I... I took your words to heart. You said I could not want anything more

than the original Rye if I truly was reincarnated. It took me a while to get what you really meant. I am inexperienced in many things. I figured if I could help out in some small way, I could better help Blackleaf."

Heidi's eyes softened. She kept her head down.

"I mean no disrespect. You are no less important. But I do not know how to help her. I thought ending the war faster would save her from the ravages of my powers. But now, after I saw her at the river with you, I believe she faces more danger from her own allies than me. If I cannot figure out how to help others and learn what they need, how can I help her?"

Rye approached and sat in front of Heidi, bowing her head. The others leaned in a bit. All the lights flickered back on, just for a moment. They revealed the alpha's long scar. She lifted her head, revealing its path along her chest, and looked at the others. They were focused on Rye.

"Aren't you supposed to be divinity?" Heidi said. "Who are you bowing to?"

Rye shook her head. "This power is not earned. It indiscriminately kills and I have no control over it. Even those who try to do good in this region are vulnerable. I figure I can do right by everyone if at least those good ones are saved. Even if they are not part of the Star Covenant. Even if they are not my species."

Heidi nodded. She tapped the she-kit's shoulder for her to raise her head. Rye purred, but stopped herself and shook straight. Dona quietly mocked her movements and sat at attention. A gust of wind blew snow across Heidi's back. She shook it loose and looked at the entrance. The cat silhouettes surrounded the rim again. Her ears sharpened as she slogged halfway up the ramp.

"I said I wanted a moment alone," Heidi barked.

"Time's up," the tom said. "The skirmishes at the bridge have started a battle. We need her ready when it ends."

Heidi walked towards the back of the den; Dona stepped out of the way, still mimicking Rye's movements. She smacked a roll of fake-fur towards

the she-kit.

"Take that with you," Heidi said. "Tell Clement it's in exchange for taking over one of his buildings... And good luck with Blackleaf. If you say she's one of the ones worth saving, I'll take your word for it."

Rye nodded, looking at the pack. Heidi stayed behind the others. Her ears flattened again. The rest kept their eyes forward, eyeing the two warriors that tried to keep their balance walking down the ramp. They stopped halfway down and motioned to her. Before taking a step, she took a last look at the group. Dona waved at her. The rest kept their heads up and eyes forward. Rye ran between them and nuzzled against Heidi's leg, purring. The alpha recoiled, but did not pull it away. Taking a deep breath, she leaned down and nudged the she-kit's head.

Rye stepped back. "Do not be too hard on yourself. None of it was your fault."

Heidi's ears stayed low, but her muzzle softened. She nudged Rye away when the UnderClan warriors reached the bottom of the ramp. Wolfgang stood; they froze. Motioning with their tails, Rye approached them. She rubbed her chest, wincing when she bent over to pick up the fake-fur roll. The warriors still rushed her. One of them pushed her up the ramp, her legs too short to overcome the fresh snow and wind.

"Goodbye, kitten!" Dona barked.

The lights flickered off again, leaving the pack in the dark. Dona walked over to one and tapped it with her paw. It flickered each time she did so. She kept tapping it, eventually drawing Wolfgang's attention. Karin walked to the entrance and glanced around the rim. The wind kept tossing more snow into the den, the ramp still growing in size. Heidi began to shiver a bit. She shook her head and watched the last UnderClan warrior leave her sight.

"It was my fault," she whispered. "But thank you."

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The wind nipped at the lines where the fake-fur covered her real fur. The wraps cooled and pressed against her wound, numbing it. She ignored it best she could and kept her eyes forward, keeping pace with her escorts that flanked her on all sides. One of them carried the roll of fake-fur for her. Everything was covered by a thin haze. The night sky was blocked in full by the overcast, and the twoleg lights on poles were but soft halos barely bright enough to put her shadow against the ground. The dense snowfall blocked her vision even more. It blew from the left, equally hindering all. But the path ahead was clear. The closest structure was in ruins beside her, running part of the length of the half-buried silverpath that spanned into the fog, across the bridge. She squinted, but could barely see anything happening until she got closer. A line of cats, colors impossible to tell, spanned the bridge's width closer to UnderClan's side. The hisses and cries were muffled, but the scent of blood was clear. The warrior in front of Rye stepped away, giving her no clearer a picture. He, and the others, were far more concerned with the fighting than keeping watch of her. Nonetheless, they were never more than a few pawsteps away. They stopped her a tree-length away from the start of the bridge and against the crumbling wall of a twoleg nest, keeping most of the snowfall away from their fur. They shook what remained off.

"You will remain here," the lead escort said.

Several warriors, all covered in dried mud, charged from the other side of the wall when they heard a series of yelps from the bridge. Rye saw the collective battle line of UnderClan move back slightly to make way for several of their warriors leaving. The new ones charged in to take their place, and more took their spot against the wall. The sight of the returning warriors made their clanmates anxious. Rye recoiled when she saw one of them collapse, her muzzle and paws covered in blood. One of the escorts rushed in to carry her out of sight. When she passed Rye, their eyes met. The young warrior's were stained red, half closed from the sting of it. She caught the scent of bile on her, claws still out. But she managed to growl at Rye.

"Where does it hurt?" the escort asked.

"What's this monster doing here? Have we captured her?"

"That's not important right now."

The warrior shook her face of the scowl. "I'm uninjured. The Shadows had some inexperienced warriors in the front when the fighting started. I tore one of them apart when I saw what they did to her."

"I still want you quarantined."

"But I'm—"

"We have no idea who among them could be carrying blackcough. Remember what our medicine cat last told us. It can spread through blood."

The exhausted warrior looked away, keeping her eyes firmly on the ground. Her escort passed her off to one of the other returning warriors, who also had blood on him. His expression was no different. He waited until the younger warrior was out of earshot before leaning close.

"How did this fight start?" the escort asked.

The older warrior shook his head. "That monster desecrated—" He stopped, glancing at Rye.

"It's okay. This one already knows. That's why she's here."

"Honestly, why do we even have a warrior code... Solestar executed Dovewhisker and the others right there on the bridge. Apparently, it started a skirmish with the border guards, then the backline and underside patrols got involved and it just grew from there. When I was called up from the tunnels, I knew it was bad."

He glanced to his sides, then walked away with his head and tail level. The escort dropped to the snow and shoved his shoulder in, rubbing away the drops of blood that brushed against it. Another walked over and sniffed it when he got up, nodding. They both reassumed their positions next to the she-kit. She looked on at the last of the warriors taking shelter on the other side of the wall they stood against. She caught some of their expressions: wide-eyed, tired, ears alert. Their fur reeked of blood. One of them walked with

a limp.

"Should I... I should help that one," Rye mewed. "Right?"

Her escort shook his head. "We know Dovewhisker had blackcough. I have no idea if that warrior was exposed to her blood or not, or is immune or not."

"I am immune to it."

"Really now?"

"Blackcough is my power. My herald immunized me when I was still a kit."

He dropped his head, baring his teeth and closing his eyes.

"There could be more injured warriors coming. We will wait."

Her paws numbed in the cold, and she began to shiver. The wind occasionally carried the scents of the bridge. Rye's nose curled at the fowl odor before fading as quickly as it came. She kept it curled. Her heart began to race. Her legs tensed up, claws unsheathed. She did not bother shaking any of the snow from her. She was consumed by the bridge. Her ears were swiveled forward by a scream that drowned out the constant echoes of the river and twolegplace. Rye took several steps back, her fur standing on end. Her legs were shaking with the rest of her body. A warrior ran from the battle line, slowing their pace when spotting her group. An ear was reddened by a gash that cut clean through it. What remained of it flopped in the wind; She could see the warrior bury the pain, grunting all the way to the wall. Before passing out of sight, the warrior circled its tail through the air, waving an 'X' where it just moved, and circled again lower.

"Impossible! They still outnumber us?" Her escort tensed up.

Two of Rye's escorts broke away and ran to the bridge. Before the tom could stop them, they were out of sight. He held his orders, glancing around at other warriors standing around. All of them circled their tails through the air. He circled his own and pointed it to the bridge. Dozens of additional warriors Rye did not notice

charged from behind him and towards the bridge. He stepped close enough to her tail to push it beneath the snow under his claws. Rye ignored it, staying tense and scenting the air. Her heart continued to race. Her breaths became shallow, tiring herself without even moving. Each step the battle line collectively took back forced her to resist the urge to run away. It finally came into view through the fog. The line of cats was long, stretching all the way across the bridge. It was two interlaced rows to draw in enemies between three UnderClan warriors. Behind that were a few dozen fresh warriors, eagerly waiting to leap and pounce into the front. She even spotted a pair fighting along the barrier that lined the ledge of the bridge. The Shadow warrior grappled the UnderClan cat and bit down on its neck. Before it could kick, it was tossed over the side; Rye looked away from it and focused on the middle. Each step back showed more detail. Near the edge of where the bridge started, she could see the blood on the backline warriors' paws. The scent of open flesh and bile was constant, despite the wind. It weaved through her nose and stuck to her tongue. She tried taking another step back, but her escort clamped firm on her tail. His muscles bulged through his thin fur; he was eager, but never moved. A scream took both of their attention. One of the UnderClan warriors in the front was tossed over the rear line of warriors, slamming onto one of the silverpath's rails. One of the fresh warriors sniffed them, resting a paw on their shoulders and bowing. Ignoring the chaos, letting others take the spot they left, the warrior prayed over its dying clanmate. For a brief moment, Rye was able to pull her eyes from the chaos and focus on those two. She even took a small step towards them. But the warrior was drawn back into it when another frontline warrior fell before him; the hole was quickly filled, and the dying cat was carried off by another leaving the battle line. The screams and hisses returned to her. Rye folded her ears back, never taking her eyes from the dying cat until she heard yipping from behind her.

"Ambush positions!" a tom yelled.

The warriors behind her, obscured by the weather, scurried about in the shadows to hide behind anything large enough to cover them. The tom who gave the order walked towards the wall Rye was against. He stayed at the furthest end of it, keeping himself

concealed.

"They cannot... they cannot seriously break through now, right?" Rye mewed.

Her remaining escort kept hold of her tail, eyes firm on the battle. The line had moved back far enough to no longer be obscured by the haze. UnderClan was still lined up to match the Shadow's forward momentum. Rye watched one of them jump onto an UnderClan warrior, biting down on its neck as it failed to break the grapple. Two of its allies joined in, all jumped by the backline. Quickly killing all three Shadows, they dragged their own dead clanmate away. But the Shadows kept pushing through the hole they had created. More appeared from the distance, forming a tight ball, led by a split tail that rose above the masses. It constantly waved forward as the remaining UnderClan warriors pushed against their frontline. They were near the support beams that connected the bridge to solid ground. The first Shadows were stepping onto UnderClan territory. Rye's heart pounded against her chest. She was numb in the snow, paralyzed from moving any further back. A massive gust of wind disrupted the fighting. For a moment, everyone froze.

"Stop her! Frontline, hold her back!"

Rye snapped from her fear. Some of the UnderClan warriors had backed off. Several Shadows had carelessly leapt over their positions to chase her. They were halted, but their target was not. Her once-white fur was covered in bits of mud and dirty slush. The she-cat's trademark eyes were lit up by the twoleg lights; Rye focused on them. Her tail bounced off the ground each time she leapt towards the battle line. The Shadows watched her leap clear over both side's formation and onto UnderClan's side. She tumbled through the shallow snow and hit one of the silverpath rails. But she scrambled to her paws and kept running. The slim vest wrapped around her body did not hinder her one bit.

"What... Blackleaf!?" Rye whispered.

"Take her back!"

The Shadow warriors chasing her did not follow her over the line. Some of the UnderClan warriors broke from their hiding spots; Rye's escort circled his tail and pointed to the bridge. Dozens more left their ambush positions to charge the scattered Shadow ranks. By the time Rye broke her gaze from Blackleaf, the fighting had returned beyond the bridge's support beams and was once again obscured by the haze. The Shadow warriors had lost their momentum.

"Blackleaf!" The split tailed Shadow tom was on his hind legs. "You don't have to do this!"

She was long past the bridge. Rye fixed on her, again. Blackleaf stopped briefly at the desperate voice. She mouthed something drowned out by the wind. Her ears folded back, her legs shaking, she kept running. Several UnderClan warriors were already giving chase. She slowed close enough to hear her raspy breathing, the wind and snow taking her strength. But it did not slow the warriors. One of them tackled her and pulled the vest off over her shoulders.

"Stop! Do not hurt her."

Her escort pounced and pinned her before she could take her second step away. She fought against his weight, but stopped when he enveloped her neck in his jaws.

"This is for Windstripe! Selfish hypocrite!"

Blackleaf was already buried in the snow, but the tom struck her anyway. Some of the warriors who followed returned to the bridge. Two stayed. They hit her sides and raked her belly while the other tom kept beating her muzzle with his unsheathed paw. Her tail twitched every time she was hit. She pushed a paw against his chest, but he did not budge. One of the warriors bit her leg and pulled down; Blackleaf's cries pounded against Rye's ears. Her heart raced as she struggled against her captor again, to no avail.

"Stand down!"

The same tom commanding from behind her called out. The angry warriors' ears perked up.

"Get away from that Shadow cat."

The three backed away from Blackleaf and looked at the tom who shouted at them. He was nearly bald, red patches covering most of his pink skin. Much of it was dotted with small, red blood welts. Even without fur, he was unphased by the cold; he shook less than the warriors. When he reached them, he glanced back at Rye. The escort lifted himself from her and took her tail in his mouth. Speaking too low for her to overhear, the warriors ran back to the ambush positions they had come from. The tom pointed his tail towards the closest wall and then at himself. Two warriors emerged – who still had blood on them from the fighting. One of them shifted around in the snow and lifted Blackleaf onto their shoulders. The other stayed nearby. It looked at every angry pair of eyes that beamed towards the medicine cat as they walked by. Getting a closer look at the commanding tom, Rye saw half his face still had some of its dark-gray fur. The other half was completely bald. His bright, yellow eyes broke through the snowfall and stared straight at her. He had no scent, even when he passed right next to her.

"Blackleaf..."

Rye's whisper was lost in the wind as the group walked past her. She reached her muzzle towards the unconscious cat; her escort tugged her back. As the battle distanced itself from UnderClan territory, the rest of the hidden warriors were sent to the bridge with a circle and point from the bald tom's tail. Several others in the area did the same. But all of Rye's attention was on Blackleaf. She had several spots of blood covering her face and back and several fresh claw marks on her face and shoulders. Two of her legs had bite marks on them, still bleeding. When she passed by Rye, her eyes opened just a bit. For the moment they were a pawstep away from each other, they stared. Blackleaf into Rye's eyes, and Rye at Blackleaf's injuries. She closed them again, letting her head fall limp. The warrior carried her along the wall they were against and around a corner. She was left with her escort and the sounds of the wind blowing against her side, the echoes of the battle far out of earshot.

"Blackleaf... what happened?"

III - 'Surrender To...'

Bit by bit, the droplets pooled together. A hole in the ceiling was covered by a thick plate of silverwood, filled with evenly-spaced holes that let fresh air inside the tunnel. Some of the snow along its surface edges was melting and forming small pools below. Sunlight poured in through the outlet as well. It bounced off the wet surfaces and was absorbed by feathers that lined a wall adjacent to the entrance of a den. Also adorned with feathers, the den itself was filled with rolls of fake-fur, a few full vials of medicine water, and plants soaking in shallow puddles naturally eroded from the uneven gray-stone. There were several large, clear-stone containers kept clean for storing water. One of the walls was covered in rows of evenly spaced claw marks. A slight breeze cycled the air from the silverwood vent to the den. It kept the scent of its occupants and the dampness of the outside tunnels away. Most of the faint sounds the occupants made were absorbed by the feathers. But the slight whistle that echoed through most tunnels remained. Though less than a tree-length in diameter, it housed several cats. All were resting or sleeping. One stared blankly at the floor. Certain they were satisfied, a she-kit stood and walked out the entrance.

"I will be gone for a while. Is that okay?" the she-kit asked.

None responded.

Waiting for several heartbeats, she sighed and walked away with her tail down. Her white fur was covered in spots of mud, most of it centered on her shoulders and thighs. Her paws were clean, claws scraping the floors. The tunnels were much wider than the den, but not any taller. Barely the height of a twoleg, she could see all of the cracks, scratches, and markings left in the roof. One of them were three claw marks in a column, a single mark in front of the others. In both directions, the length stretched on out of sight. A stronger breeze flowed from behind her. She walked forward. The daylight kept the twoleg lights that evenly lined the walls off. They reflected a good amount of it down the tunnels, reflecting slimy patches

along the walls and floor. The further she went from the feather-lined den, the more of echoes she heard from distant occupants. She spotted none ahead, though. The scents of dried blood and herbs faded. They were replaced by muck. She followed a whiff of lavender. Eventually she came to an intersection. Straight on, the sunlight was replaced with the buzzing of the faint twoleg lights. To her left, several silverwood vents lined the ceiling of a smaller tunnel. The lavender was stronger there. She took a deep breath and walked down it. Only three cats wide, she stopped and pushed herself against the wall to let a group of warriors pass.

"Keep your scent off this wall," one of them growled.

The rest of the group glared at her, each focused on her blue and green eyes. One of them avoided it; she had fake-fur wrapped around one of her paws. She left no mark on the wall, but the last in the group smeared mud across where she touched it. Rye waited until they disappeared around the intersection she came from before continuing. The tunnel was beaming with natural light. A flat tube blocked some of it, pressed against the wall. Where it was exposed showed colored wires; an effort was made to cover these holes with fake-fur. Some of it had since disintegrated to being useless. She kept going. The lavender was no stronger the closer she got to her destination. A tree-length into the tunnel, there were three cutouts. Two of them were collapsed by rubble, but the leftmost one was blocked by a plank of wood from the inside. Two warriors guarded it; one distanced while the other was right next to it. Both looked at her when she approached. She motioned her head towards the entrance. The guards glanced at each other.

"The, um, lavender scent is fading. Can I replace it?"

"There's no need to make excuses." The guard kept his voice low. "She's out of heat."

The she-kit perked up. "So I can see her now!?"

"Yes."

"May I... have some time alone with her?"

"Clementstar's exact words were 'do not leave Rye alone with her'. We will stay."

"I just wish to speak with her. See how she is—"

"We stay."

Rye held her words and nodded. The guard blocking her way pushed the wood plank down and revealed the entrance. Before entering, she looked up and down the tunnel. Barely any sounds, no new smells, and only the guards. She did catch a faint scent of the occupant, though. Rye walked through the entrance and blocked it again with the plank. Every surface was covered in scratches, the floor having most. There were extras laying nearby; she blocked off the two cracks left by the larger plank with them, completely blocking vision inside. She put her ear to it, hearing the faint scrapes of the guard's claws outside. Deep cawing turned her around. Blackbirds had surrounded the large, circular silverwood vent at the top. They peered inside. Rye tried hissing them away, but they were too high. They clicked at her each time she jumped, but she quickly gave up when she saw the lone she-cat tucked away under a shadow. The she-cat's fur was brown from the mud she lay in, ignoring the fake-fur wraps around all of her legs and her chest. They still had old blood stains on them. The fur on her thighs was slightly thinner wherever she could reach her head. The 'X' mark that adorned both sides had been raked over, long since healed. Blood still dotted her fur, the droplets frozen to her legs. Rye's fur crept on end. But she pressed forward, no more than a tail-length from the she-cat. She stretched her neck and sniffed her. She reeked of mud and dirt. Looking over her shoulder, the she-kit spotted what remained of her defecations in a recessed corner next to the stomped lavender flowers that overpowered most of it. Rye closed the rest of the distance and tried to look at the she-cat's face. The claws on her neck made her jump back. Rye kept herself under the sunlight. The she-cat had a paw stretched into it, dull claws unsheathed. When she reached out to touch it, it shrieked away. Her heart started pounding when she spotted orange in the she-cat's pink eyes. She could hear her the growling behind her borne fangs. Despite the mud, her fur managed to puff up. The wind fell silent, as did the blackbirds. All of them eagerly watched through the vent.

Rye took a deep breath. "Blackleaf?"

Blackleaf stopped growling.

"You remember me, right? Rye?"

The she-cat narrowed her eyes.

"Your wraps should probably be changed. And-And they were not properly wrapped by that warrior. I should—"

"Why are you here?" Blackleaf growled.

"It, um..." she glanced at the entrance. "Do not worry about that."

"Then leave."

"I should inspect your wounds. And the lavender flowers—"

"My wounds are fine and I hate lavender. Leave."

"I... I really should at least look at—"

"I know more about my wounds than you, kit... Please, just leave me alone."

Blackleaf's fur calmed when she hid her fangs away. She slogged further back into the mud. Rye stepped forward to beacon. The medicine cat hissed, forcing her back into the sunlight. The she-kit felt her chest pounding again. Her ears flattened, and her tail was soaked from letting it lay on the wet gray-stone. She sat, looking down at the other who left herself on her side.

"I... do not want to leave you."

Blackleaf looked away.

"Why did you flee your clan?"

"Just one moon as a medicine cat. And Solestar, Leaftail, Flyfoot, everyone. They confirmed who I really was, and they were finally over it."

"Surely, not all of them."

"It doesn't matter who, anymore. I saw a chance to leave and I took it. I'll take any chance to leave."

Rye tapped the floor. "I was... also told you were in heat when you left."

Blackleaf growled.

"That means you lost control of it, right?"

"Why is that important to you, kit? You've never even been in heat."

"I just want... I do not wish to see you upset."

The she-cat narrowed her eyes.

"I have watched you from afar since I was old enough to leave camp. You are fourteen—well, fifteen moons old now, and only slightly larger than me. Sometimes you go to this large thunderstick the twolegs did not remove after the war and pray. You have friends in the Axin Mess survivors. At least, they are the only ones I see around you. Especially the tom named Wolfgang. Despite how hostile you act, I know you care deeply about StarClan. I believe you are trying to communicate with them again. I can only assume some kind of trauma in your upbringing lead you to always being alone. The others respect you, fear you even. But I do not. I believe you to be the most compassionate, beautiful cat in this region. And I do not wish to see you so distraught."

Blackleaf kept her eyes locked to Rye's. She arched her head up. The she-kit leaned closer to try and finally see her face. She was met with fangs; she dodged the medicine cat's snap. Her face was covered in mud. One of her ears was torn and untreated, still glowing pink and red in the light. Her nose, which she kept clean, had many small scratches that disrupted her skin color. One of her jaws had a healing bite mark she nearly missed. Rye's ears fell when she saw Blackleaf's fangs.

"You think you know me because of all that?" she hissed. "You can spy on me, and watch me, and obsess all you want. I don't care. But

don't you *dare* say that's me. *I* set myself up for this. All of this. And you have *no right* to say otherwise just because you *think* I fit your fantasy!"

Rye stepped back. "I... but—"

"You want to know what I think of you? I think you can't see anything past those odd eyes of yours. I think you're weird. Infatuated with a cat you only really met right now! You have no idea how anyone thinks of themselves or others. How things change. I bet you think Solestar is evil. And I am good. Perfect, even... I know you watch me. You just sit on the borders of your territory purging this region of its evil heathens, right? Like my comrades? This region doesn't need you. *No one* needs some dirt-brained snake from the Place of No Stars who is *unberührt* in everything but daydreaming! If I had my way, I'd drag you back there myself just to get me out of your head. Now get out of my sight!"

Blackleaf leaned forward and slapped Rye; she flinched a little. The she-kit left her head down, folding her ears away from the hissing medicine cat. The whistle of the breeze returned. Snow slid between the holes in the silverwood vent and onto her. Even more blackbirds were gathered around, some peering close enough to have their beaks through the holes. Blackleaf crept back into the shadows, never letting up her gaze. Rye pressed a paw to the side of her face. A small drop of blood was left on her paw pad. She licked it and rubbed where it hurt. The medicine cat stepped even further back when she saw it. When everything but her eyes were out of sight, she stood and walked towards the wood planks covering the entrance. She carefully pushed one just far enough away to slip through the hole they left and out of the den; One of the guards quickly blocked it. She was back in the shadow of the darker tunnel. The smell of the dirt and lavender had faded. She leaned back to try and catch them again. Her paw wiped the last drop of blood that came from her cheek and rubbed it on the wood. Her heart pounded against her chest when she saw the red dot quickly absorbed. It pounded even faster when she took her first few steps back the way she came. Rye clenched her eyes shut and kept walking, despite her shaking legs. Her claws scraped against the

gray-stone when she ran. The guards watched her all the way down the tunnel and around the corner. When she returned to the larger one, she pressed herself against a wall and slid down. Several passing warriors glanced at her. Rye buried her face in her paws and flattened her ears. Her tail wrapped close enough for her to feel it against the scratch on her face.

Chapter 39

The noise in the den dampened with the arrival of the last pair. The center was completely clean, allowing light to shine through the wide silverwood vent in the ceiling. Its deep orange was muted from the clouds that gathered high above. Among them, the sky-monsters made their terrible wails. Some of the occupants were shaking, or had their tails wrapped tight around their resting paws. Whenever they passed close enough to be heard, they were completely still. The yawning tom limped to his place in one of the corners. His tan fur was spotted with mud, but his black muzzle and paws were clean. The trinket around his ankle clanged against the gray-stone floor; the cross being covered in mud and the little twoleg bound to it hidden underneath. Its pinging did nothing to soothe the uneasy group of senior warriors. The ones who were not frightened by the sky-monsters were glaring at the pair their leader sat opposite to. Rye was partly nestled among one of the war dogs to keep her from touching the walls. Her brown and black coat reflected none of the light from the center, and her musty scent overpowered everything. She took up a fourth of the den by herself, the dozen others forming a semi-circle around them.

"Should I wait until they stop?" Clementstar yawned again, forcing himself alert.

"No. It's too important," The large tom's single ear twitched as he brushed his mud-laden fur aside to clear more of it from his bald patches. "It's been a while since we've done anything like this."

"Given we have Karin and Rye here, it'll certainly be far from a traditional gathering."

The group still looked uneasy. One of the warriors glanced outside, looking both directions down the tunnel the den connected to.

"It's alright," Clementstar said. "I don't want to hide anything from this meeting. Like normal."

"Yeah." The warrior glared at Rye. "Like *normal*."

The she-kit kept her head down.

"I thought we could start with some lighter news." Clementstar cleared his throat. "This morning, I was made aware of two—no, three new potential warriors out of the littermate apprentices mentored by Burn. That battle a quarter-moon ago, one of our field leaders saw them take the position of a fallen warrior in the frontline. One of them took the warrior's body away, while the other two held until the Shadows retreated. She believes that is enough of an assessment, and has recommended they be promoted. They had a strange request, though. They want to take on a singular warrior name, since they have identical coat markings. I figured I would ask the, well, most of the other ranking members what they think. Should we honor their request?"

"They were all held captive by the Shadows," one of them said. "They gave nothing away and came back to fight with their clanmates. That alone deserves commendation."

"They fought as birds of a feather," another said. "If they wish to be so in all things, I wouldn't complain."

The rest of the den nodded in agreement.

Clementstar nodded as well. "Though we lost several fine warriors that night, the Clan of False Shadows suffered a serious defeat. Those three understand the noble code they follow, and carry with them the spirits of their fallen clanmates into battle. Though neither they nor their mentor are in attendance, I approve their promotion and request. Dovewhisker and Owltongue are surely giving their blessing from silverpelt. By the powers of StarClan, I give them their warrior names. Gravelpaw, Rabbitpaw, Dampenpaw, from this moment on will be known as Gravelstep, Rabbitstep, and Dampenstep. StarClan honors their powerful bond, and certainly welcomes them as full warriors of UnderClan."

"Gravelstep, Rabbitstep, Dampenstep." The group kept their voices low as they chanted the new warriors' names.

"What of their mother?" One of them asked. "She was injured at that battle, and they have been asking to see her."

"Felsblock was released from the medicine den and reassigned last night while Rye was asleep," Clementstar said. "Now that we are certain she didn't contract blackcough, she will replace a warrior injured on a deep patrol."

The rest of the group looked at the large tom.

"It was my decision, not Heavyclaw's," Clementstar said, pointing at the large tom. "The warrior she replaced is in the medicine den trying to recover from an infected rat bite."

"Felsblock was injured during the battle," one of them said. "Is sending her to a hazardous region of the tunnels really best?"

"We can't afford to lose our deep patrols," Clementstar sighed. "They're our first and only warning in case the Shadows find new ways into our territory from their backlands. Her injuries were in places she should be able to keep her paws out of, and she's been instructed to avoid tunnels that require crawling. I'm sure her kin will understand."

Heavyclaw dipped his head and briefly looked away from the group. The sky-monsters hissed overhead again, causing a couple of them to unsheathe their claws. Rye tried her best not to look at them, but she could not help it. When one of them glared back, she stopped. Karin accidentally flicked some water off her tail, hitting one of the cats in the face.

"Oh, sorry!" she said. "This den is just so small."

"It's fine." The she-cat shook her fur, glaring at the war dog. "Clementstar, I don't want to be rude, but why are *they* here? We still follow our rules of absolute secrecy, don't we?"

"Of course we do," Clementstar yawned. "But Rye is here to act as a stopgap medicine cat and Heidi's pack have moved into our territory. The dogs have taken a sudden interest in the war, and Rye isn't going anywhere until it's over. We shouldn't keep them in the

dark forever. Not after what happened to Dovewhisker."

The group still made uneasy glances towards the she-kit.

"Speaking of medicine cats," Clementstar continued, "we have to address Blackleaf. The only reason I waited a quarter-moon to bring this up is because she was in heat and lost control of it. I didn't want any unnecessary harm coming to her. Especially after the beating those warriors gave her that night—"

"With all due respect, she deserved what she got and worse," one of them growled.

"There's no respect given wishing harm to another," Clementstar growled. "But I have little sympathy for her. While she can't be blamed for Dovewhisker's death, her words aggravated Windstripe enough to throw herself at the enemy to try to kill her. She is especially hated among the Axin Mess survivors, and has disrespected the event on multiple occasions at the border. Her attitude has made her infamous even among her own clanmates. And, now that we have her, we need to decide what to do with her."

Rye felt her heart thump faster. Her ears swiveled front and she leaned forward a bit. Glancing over the others, their faces were a mix of scowls and whispers. The sky-monsters passed by again and none of them reacted.

"I say we execute her, like they did to Dovewhisker," one of them growled. "Right there on the bridge."

"Out of the question!" Heavyclaw hissed. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath when he got the whole den's attention. "It... Execution is against the warrior code."

"Ancestor clans don't follow the warrior code," another said. "The code only calls for mercy towards those who follow it. I agree. She should be put to death for Windstripe alone."

"She has not done anything wrong!"

The others glared at Rye. She felt her heart pound through her chest

with each angry grunt and quiet hiss that came her way.

"Clementstar, I do not think it's appropriate to have this kit here for the rest of the meeting," one of the senior warriors said.

Others nodded in agreement. Even Heavyclaw and Clementstar did not seem to object. Rye felt her energy slowly fade. Her ears swiveled behind her when the anger did not fade from the den. She stood from her spot against Karin and slowly padded towards the entrance. None stopped her. The she-cat sitting in the way stood when she saw her leader approach. He saw her out of the den and leaned close when they were both in the outside tunnel.

"Sorry," he said. "But they're right. Your presence makes everyone uneasy. I also think it best you stay away from Blackleaf until we decide what'll be done with her. But you can go to the surface for a while. Stay among the twoleg structures, though. I'll send someone to fill you in on what we decide."

Rye kept her eyes from his, but nodded. Taking a left from the den, she padded towards a small light at the end of the long tunnel.

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No matter how she set her paws down, they always felt cold among the snow. The evening light was fully diffused by the thin clouds high above. She looked up to occasionally look at the sky-monsters thundering around. They were quieter than before, and so high they appeared as black specks. They lost Rye's attention whenever they disappeared above the clouds or out of her vision range. She took deep breaths, the mud on her fur making the cold worse than what it was. She could feel the sting it brought to the scratch Blackleaf had given her earlier. The snow on every surface of the twoleg structures made them appear almost blue against the evening sun. Pieces of debris lay all around the two she walked between. The narrow, short nests had decayed enough to no longer have a scent. Each of them shared the same teal walls, some parts charred and

worn down to the browns of the wood and the deep reds of the stone. Shadows covered everything, making even her white fur difficult to spot. When she reached a stray plank of wood, she spotted dry blood on it. Stopping and sniffing, it too had no scent. She rested her paw on the stain; it was no bigger than it. Resting it there for a while, her eyes were drawn left by the sky-monsters passing overhead. Quicky disappearing over the roofs of the nests, she ran her eyes down a crack that split it down the middle. Between that she saw a smaller nest in the distance. Still within the group of twoleg nests, it was less than a quarter the size of the ones around her and made entirely of stone. She spotted a guard in front of it. But, in her peripheral, she spotted a closer warrior in the crack she was looking through. Rye kept walking, quickly losing sight of the distant nest. She found herself at an intersection between four nests. She caught a potent scent from one, and she felt some of her anxiety disappear. Leaving the intersection either way would keep her concealed from the open by a stone wall, the same one she hid behind during the battle. Walking around to the front of it, she saw one of the warriors who had been following her. She ignored him and peered through the nest's unblocked entrance.

"Haaaaaail, kitten!"

Rye snapped her head to Dona, but she did not approach. She was sitting next to Juta, who was still wrapped in Heidi's vest. The nearly identical war dog lay on her good side. Dona occasionally glanced at her chest.

"I'm not going anywhere," Juta growled. "Why do you keep looking at my chest?"

"I have to make sure your ribs are healing," Dona whimpered.

"They aren't going to go any faster if *you* look at them."

"That's not true. I have to make sure they heal back right. If they get crooked at all, I'll glare at them and scare them back straight."

"You can't even see the... you know what? Carry on. As you can see, kitten, business as usual in her mind."

Dona tapped her paws, eager but unwilling to approach the she-kit.

"It feels too long since I last saw you," Rye said. "It has been a grueling quarter-moon. Where are Heidi and Wolfgang?"

"Oh. Your cat-speak sounds so much better!" Dona barked.

"That's because your *scheisse* wolf-speak isn't all she's hearing anymore," Juta mumbled.

"We're sticking to Heidi's rules like muck! Wolfgang's helping her hunt and carry enough for us all, I'm not moving a me-length from Juta's side, and Karin is in that meeting with Clementstar."

"I just left that meeting."

"Really!? Was she having fun? Heidi wants to know *everything*."

"Actually, they kicked me out before they said anything of significance."

"What *did* you stay for?"

"They are promoting three apprentices who apparently fought valiantly at the bridge. I was removed when the subject changed."

Juta shook her head. "The warrior code should have something against promoting apprentices until they're old enough. Those three were on the surface earlier. None of them even a year old. A couple moons of training and apprenticeship isn't enough for full-time soldiers."

"But the warrior code also says a leader's word *is* the warrior code," Dona said.

"And somehow, you know that and I don't." Juta leaned up and aimed Dona's muzzle towards the she-kit, thudding back down and groaning. "That's a dumb rule, anyway."

Dona bent over and sniffed Juta. "Don't strain yourself. I'll move my muzzle for you."

"You have too much energy to be standing next to me all day. Burn some of it off by talking to the kitten... and whoever is about to walk in here."

Rye turned towards the entrance. Sure enough, a tom walked through. His bright, yellow eyes could not distract her from his mostly furless body, aside from the large patch on his face. His whiskers were missing. Without his fur, most of his ribs and spine bulged through his lean muscles. The tom's breathing was slightly raspy. As he approached with a slight limp like his leader's, she still could not scent him. He sat on the opposite side of the small den. Dona did not take his eyes off him for a heartbeat.

Juta sighed, sliding herself to better see the two cats. "You can stop glaring at him. He isn't going to pounce or anything."

Dona's ears were sharp. "Heidi said don't let anything happen to you."

Rye caught the intent in Dona's eyes again.

"I assure you, I'm not much of a threat to anyone," the tom said. He showed off his near furless sides and held up a paw; the slits for claws were covered by thick calluses.

Dona's tongue flapped out again. "That's great! Not your fur. But the no killing. Yay!"

Juta smacked Dona's shoulder. "Don't you think Clement would send more than one cat to kill a healthy war dog?"

"We're kind of old, and their fangs are scary."

Juta shook her head and rested it on the floor again, keeping her eyes on the older tom. Some of the evening light had dimmed from forming clouds. The sky-monsters did not stop their fight, moving slightly higher. Their screeches became ambient whistles constantly wailing in and out of earshot. The tom took a few additional steps to Rye, sitting close enough to all three to address them. He coughed and cleared his throat.

"We just picked up the rest of your stuff from the den." The tom had

to speak quieter with his scratchy voice. "We found an additional roll of fake-fur, and a silver ring—"

"I carved stuff on the wall," Dona interrupted. "Did the den carvings survive?"

"Um, I didn't check," the tom said. "Most of the den is snowed in. Have to wait for it to run off into the tunnel... Anyway, it's been a while, Juta. I've only had glimpses here and there."

"I'm surprised you remember me," Juta said.

"War dogs weren't commonly roaming around *hamburg*, even during the Great Sky War. You, Karin, and Heidi were pretty memorable."

Dona was sniffing towards the tom. She leaned forward enough to not leave Juta's side and tapped his head. He quickly bat it away, to her dismay.

"Is this one Dona?" he said.

"Hey, he knows my name!" Dona's ears perked right up.

"And, of course, I know who *you* are." The tom's eyes were fixed on Rye's. "The only way back to your clan is past the deep patrols and, somehow, up a pole. Heavyclaw said unless you figured out how to climb like a twoleg or are willing to risk the river, you're stuck here."

"Well, I told Clementstar I would aid him," Rye said. "Besides, I no longer wish to contact Kritz. I must pray he keeps a level head and assumes the best."

"Yeah," Burn said. "You got kicked out of the meeting when they brought up Blackleaf, right?"

Rye's ears shot up. "Well, it is actually... I do not believe they trust me."

"So there's still a need to keep things from her, then," Juta said.

The tom narrowed his eyes. "Senior leadership keeps patrol routes

and numbers so close *they* don't even know them. Ironic, seeing as the majority of clan's seniority are not clan-born. I don't like secrets, and I hate being lied to. The kit will learn what she wants from me, at least."

"Should we start with your name?" Juta said. "Dona hasn't met you, either."

The tom glanced past Rye and at Dona. Her paws were eagerly tapping against the floor, tail wagging soft enough to not bother the other war dog. After the sky-monsters whistled overhead, he cleared his throat and lapped his tongue a few times.

"That's a good place to start. I'm sure you gain no advantage at knowing who I am at this point. Name's Burn. I'm one of three deputies, along with Heavyclaw and Blueclaw."

Rye's eyes widened. "You were not exaggerating when you said senior members were foreign-born. Those are the names of notable Axin Mess survivors."

"Clementstar's from *paris*, and all his deputies are from *hamburg*. We lead a clan of cats born in *berlin* from kin who used to be part of *hamburg's* AchseClan, which itself was a combination of StoneClan, BreezeClan, kittypets, strays, and a group of rogues I once lead. Mess of a clan we are, aren't we?"

"Well, it certainly is... diverse," Rye said.

"Very!" Dona barked. "It's rare to see a cat without fur. How are you still alive? It's snowing out there."

"My skin's all kinds of messed up from the Great Sky War." Burn ran his clawless paws across his leg. "Lots of burns, lots of dead spots. Got to be careful of frostbite every now and then."

"It sounds frightening," Rye cringed when his paws ran over the hardened folds in his legs, "to go through life like this without protection. I am glad you have not given up on such a ravaged body."

"I don't need motivation or pity from you, kit," Burn spat, narrowing

his eyes.

Rye took a few steps away from the older tom, nearly bumping into Dona. She opened her muzzle a few times but said nothing. As the sky-monsters passed overhead, what remained of Burn's fur had sharpened. His tail flicked across the floor.

Juta lifted her head. "Easy, Burn. She's trying. And she has succeeded. Trust me. There's a reason I have broken ribs."

Burn's fur settled.

"I should not have spoken so informally," Rye mewed.

The tom shook his head. "There's no need to mew like a scared kit. I shouldn't have snapped at someone without context... How about we change the subject? What's been bothering you? I can see it in your eyes."

Rye looked away.

"It's about Blackleaf, isn't it?"

She met his gaze again.

"The only senior member who's seen her since her capture is Blueclaw. Since she lost control of her heat cycle, toms weren't allowed anywhere near her den. She's stopped for now, and Clementstar is supposed to figure out what to do with her. That's what I was told before the meeting. How was she when you went to visit her?"

Rye rubbed a paw against the scratch on her face. "She was... nothing like I imagined. The certainty I had seen in her from my birth to now was just not there. She seemed afraid. Defeated. And my words did nothing to help her feelings. I just did not expect this would be how it went."

Burn tilted his head. "You... *expected* to meet her?"

"She loves her!" Dona barked. "I told you Blackleaf is very sleek."

"There you go being filthy again," Juta mumbled.

"It is not love," Rye yelled. "But I do admire her greatly. She's beautiful, smart, strong. Without the powers, without commanding a branch. Just a she-cat with a goal worthy of the Stars and the drive to see it through. Or so I thought, at least."

The tom nodded.

"I assumed she had been treated horribly by her allies since I last lay eyes on her ten days ago. But she must be under a great emotional weight to lose control of her heat cycle. They have certainly beaten her, but who knows what else... I just want her pain to stop."

"I know the feeling," Burn said. "And I've seen it before. But I can't pity Blackleaf."

"What?" Rye said.

The war dogs narrowed their eyes.

Burn looked past Rye to address them. "Think about it like this. The only knowledge you have of Blackleaf is from Rye. And her knowledge was biased. I'm not discrediting you, Rye, but the Blackleaf we know is fowl-mouthed, combative, and has little respect for the past. Windstripe was a member of my rogue group in *hamburg*. She took charge of those who decided to leave without joining Littlestar. Unlike other fleeing groups, hers made it to *berlin* with few deaths and gave birth to most of the clan-born, so everyone respects her. She gave a good reputation to foreign-born cats. Good enough to allow a kittypet to lead without changing his twoleg name. She might not have been a believer in StarClan, but she was a stalwart of the warrior code. The Shadow's behavior constantly pushed against that, and Blackleaf was one of the catalysts for that behavior. If I had to choose who to believe, I'd take Windstripe's word over yours."

"I..." Rye stepped away from the war dogs. "What about Dovewhisker? Your warriors found her and Blackleaf near the Shadow's sacred spot before being forced to withdraw."

"True," Burn said. "But her actions towards us are what count right now. You say her goals were aligned with the Stars. So were Dovewhisker's. Dovewhisker sneaking away was selfish, but she never lashed out at her own clanmates or threaten to force mate apprentices. I was never a believer, but I trusted Windstripe when she said Blackleaf is a bad medicine cat and pushed StarClan further away from our faithful. Now we are out both our medicine cats and must end this war quickly, still outnumbered despite the Shadow's blackcough. If seeing Blackleaf defeated like this helps morale—"

"I will not let you lay one harmful paw on her!" Rye hissed. "She is a good medicine cat. She just... has given up."

The she-kit felt her heartbeat race against her chest. Her fur bristled a bit, but she did her best to keep her composure. Dona and Juta glanced at each other.

"Hey," Juta said. "Clement isn't seriously going to kill her, is he?"

"No one said anything about killing," Burn said. "Clementstar wouldn't so openly violate the morals of the warrior code. Can't say the same for our clanmates, though. Many want to see her executed how the Shadows did Dovewhisker. He'd probably go for interrogation, though. Blackleaf should have personal information about senior members of her clan, unlike Molenose. And unlike him, she may be willing to cooperate since she freely fled her clan. Is that good enough for you, she-kit?"

Burn stood and stretched his hind legs, the folds staying rigid no matter how far back they twisted. He coughed more, shivering at a sudden gust of wind. The sky-monsters had stopped hissing. More sunlight had disappeared behind the clouds. He glanced outside.

"Well, I should head back underground," he said. "Clementstar's probably done with the meeting. I'll recommend Blackleaf visit our clan's sacred spot with you present. At the very least, it would make her more cooperative if what you say about her is true."

"Thank you for—"

Burn stepped back as Rye approached.

"Sorry," he said. "Force of habit. Don't like being rushed."

Rye nodded, giving the older tom space to walk out of the den. He did not flinch when his paws touched the snow. Instead, he stopped. Parts of his fur that were spiked calmed when he gazed upon the evening sky. Dona leaned forward again, trying to catch his absent scent. After a deep breath, he quickly padded out of sight. Rye looked out the entrance, the sunset briefly catching her eye. She lifted an ear; the sky-monsters were long gone. Her attention slowly drifted to the darkening clouds. Rye's head dipped, and she closed her eyes. Her heartbeat started thumping again when she thought about Blackleaf. The war dogs stared at her, careful not to make any noise.

Chapter 40

The snowfall had returned as a gentle sprinkle. Rye sneezed as gusts of wind blew it in her face. But it threatened more activity as its clouds blocked the moon entirely. The usual holes would appear and wisps of moonlight would be let in before closing again. The noise from the distant twoleg activity was quieter than usual, further dampened by the snow. Several warriors took positions outside. Four were following them, keeping a tree-length away and saying nothing. One of them swirled its tail in the air; the others dispersed behind hills and other twoleg nests. But the nest they were closing in on was much smaller and spaced away from the others on a slight hill, the same one she spotted earlier that day. The nest was illuminated by a single dull twoleg light placed over the entrance, which still had its wood cover. It was entirely made of stone and big enough to store tools the twolegs used. Rye spotted them laid against the wall of another nest. When her escorts vanished completely, she looked back at the second she-cat following her. The fake-fur wraps were still on all four of her legs. New ones had been added to the base of her tail. Even with the snow dotting it, she was still covered in the mud of her prison den.

"We have arrived, Blackleaf," Rye said.

"Just take me back," Blackleaf whispered.

"This will be good for..." Rye faced forward again. "I mean, I assure you it will be relaxing. I hear the water is quite pleasant, and there is nowhere else like it."

The wood cover blocked the entrance everywhere but the bottom, where a smooth hole had been bore large enough for a dog to slip through. Rye got behind Blackleaf and gently nudged her through the hole. The snap of cold snow was replaced by warmth that made the she-kit shake her fur and take a deep breath in, relaxing every muscle in her body. A dim, orange light above the entrance lit the inside as well. The sound of gargling underpinned everything else she heard. The warmth came from a large pool of water taking up a

third of the small den. The wisps of steam rising from it flowed slowly out the entrance hole, keeping the thick walls dry. It did not make a whistle when it left, and the outside gusts of wind were muted by the walls. Behind the puddle of water lay a dog, taking up nearly the entire back of the den and resting her head as close as she could without getting her fur wet. Her black and brown fur kept her shrouded in the dim light, but Rye's ears perked up when she finally noticed her.

"Heidi!" Rye purred.

"Juta and Dona said you'd be here tonight," Heidi said. "Figured something good was going to happen."

Her eyes drifted past her muzzle and to her massive bald scar. She made no attempt to hide it, laying with her left side exposed and showing most of it. When Heidi noticed, Rye focused back on Blackleaf. The medicine cat was staring firmly at the scar.

"It's not as bad as you think," Heidi said. "But this place has a way of making you forget about such things. No matter how serious. Same time, every quarter-moon, a broken pipe leaks water into this hole. The pipes that bring hot water to this place run through the nest we occupy, so the pack has a warm place to sleep. Spots like this make me almost glad the masters forgot about some parts of *berlin*. The warmth is worth losing a bit of sleep for."

"Just be-be glad I do not bite your ear off for taking up so much space." An old she-cat was sitting on Heidi's back. Her fur had a slight blue tint almost hidden by the dim light. Her tail flicked about when her eyes reached Blackleaf. "Well, well. Burn said you might show up. I did not think so."

"Come on, Blueclaw. Don't give her a hard time," Heidi said.

"I intend to," Blueclaw said. "She is in our sacred spot. She better learn something."

Rye glared at the UnderClan deputy, who was unphased. She growled at the she-kit. The eyes of a second cat in the corner caught her attention. He lay adjacent to the back wall Heidi was against, to

the right. His brown fur made him even harder to spot. Arching his head up revealed several scars around his chest, his long fur thinner around them. Doing so made him as tall as Rye and Blackleaf standing. The massive wildcat stretched his large paws forward, dipping one in the water and licking it clean.

"*Dummkopf*. Do not drink that water," Blueclaw growled. "It-It will make you sick."

"Just cleaning paw. Tough stomach." His deep voice put Rye at ease a bit. The tom's ears perked when he spotted his clanmate. "Blackpaw! I not see you in moons."

The medicine cat lifted her head to face him, straitening her posture slightly. "Hello, Molenose."

Molenose's ears drooped. "You look sad. Did I call you wrong...? Oh, you promoted?"

She nodded.

"So soon, so young? What call you?"

"Blackleaf," she said meekly.

"Leaf. Traditional ancestor name. Remind me my old clan."

Blackleaf sat as close to the pool of water as she could, looking into it.

"Being captured not easy on spirit," Molenose said. "You have worse than me. May have to heal under cats from now on."

The medicine cat's eyes shot straight towards him.

"I know under medicine cats' dead," he continued. "Blueclaw kind enough to tell me news sometimes. Never heard word about you, or Flyfoot, though. I ask, and ask. Anyway, war over for me. Told I would not leave until one clan left. Clementstar not have stomach to execute captives. Good for me, yes? Angelika make it back safe?"

Blackleaf nodded.

"Good... You must be new capture, yes? Been gone from Shadows over two moons now. How is clan?"

The medicine cat shook her head.

"Just tell me about few." He tapped his clawless paws against the floor. "What about Flyfoot? Wolfgang? Is apprentice group doing good without their mentor? Any new kits—"

"I *don't* want to talk about the clan!" Blackleaf hissed. "So stop asking questions."

"Okay." Molenose's ear flattened.

"Horse-dirt!" Blueclaw hissed. "Your orders mean horse-dirt, little one. The war is over for you, too."

Blackleaf opened her mouth, but said nothing. She sighed, sliding herself closer to the warmth of the pool of water. Rye watched the medicine cat's muscles flex and relax. A deep, quick rumble took all of their attention for a heartbeat. The others ignored it, but Rye and Blackleaf watched drops of water pour from a massive, white container raised half the height of a twoleg off the ground. A pipe that ran along the wall the container was attached to was leaking into it and overflowing into the hole. The water nearly overflowed the hole when it stopped.

"Broken twoleg stuff. Majestic, I know," Blueclaw said, rolling her eyes. "Get in, little one."

Blackleaf looked at her.

"You-You are clearly frustrated and sad. The water will calm you down."

"LeafClan have place almost just like this," Molenose said. "Mousetail fill it with flowers. Use it to ease scared cats and clean deep wounds. Littlestar use it, too."

Heidi leaned across the pool and sniffed the medicine cat. "Also, I thought you were scentless. Your fur reeks of blood and shit. And there's remnants of your heat."

Blackleaf glared at the war dog, who stared back and rested her front paws forward into the pool. After a few heartbeats, Blackleaf dipped a paw in the water. Her eyes shot open as she slid herself the rest of the way in, keeping her head and whiskers dry. Rye sat near the edge of the pool. The medicine cat's paws shifted underneath the water until she was satisfied. She could sit without her head going under. What spilled over the edge of the pool covered the floor of the den. Heidi lifted herself briefly to let the water pressed against her flow underneath. Molenose sniffed at it. Rye reached out a paw and touched the back of Blackleaf's neck; she swatted it away and hissed. The she-kit leapt back a bit.

"Let her groom fur," Molenose said. "She help get dirt out of it. It soothing."

"I don't need to be brushed like some kittypet," Blackleaf hissed. "I'll groom myself."

Rye noticed Blueclaw's satisfied nodding.

"Soothing, isn't it?" Heidi said.

Blackleaf looked away.

"I wish I was small enough to fit in there," the war dog continued, resting her chin on the floor. "Oh well... You aren't much like Rye's description. Juta and Dona told me what Rye knew, but I want to hear it from you."

"Hear what?" Blackleaf said.

"Why you left, mouse-brain," Blueclaw growled. "The obvious question. The only medicine cat I have seen desert was Yellowstar." Blueclaw shook her head. "Besides, no one here is going to judge. You had reasons."

"Don't you hate me, too?" Blackleaf said.

Blueclaw narrowed her eyes. "N-No. Windstripe hated you. I just do not like your attitude... What is it? You sound so meek, and I know there is not one cat among the Shadows that makes you meek. Except Solestar."

Blackleaf glared at the old she-cat, baring her fangs.

Blueclaw shook her head. "Did Solestar—"

"I left on my own," the medicine cat said. "After I helped Dovewhisker to our sacred spot, the others thought I was a traitor. They all had it in the back of their heads after the battle Windstripe was killed in. They thought I didn't care. They said I put StarClan above them. But is that... that can't be wrong. Dovewhisker wasn't a killer. She didn't care about the war. She just wanted the same thing I did. I swear!"

"No-No one blames you for Dovewhisker," Blueclaw growled. "Solestar executed her and the other captives. What happened after Dovewhisker was recaptured?"

Blackleaf looked at her reflection in the pool. "I stopped being their comrade. They beat me, mocked me... it's almost like all the feelings they held against me when I was an apprentice came out. They didn't need me anymore. I ran away from them one last time."

"Not everyone hate you," Molenose said. "I like your fire. You wildcat in spirit."

"I failed you, too," the medicine cat whispered.

The wildcat shook his head. "Under cats would never let me go. I learn too much about their territory. But you try. Bet most others care not if I come back."

"It doesn't matter," Blackleaf growled. "The Clan of False Shadows doesn't need me anymore. It never did."

A large gust of wind sucked some of the warmth from the den. Rye shivered as it blew past her, taking the warmth from the overflow running around her paws and briefly making it cold. The light flickered, taking Heidi's attention for a bit. Molenose and Blueclaw still kept their eyes on Blackleaf. The war dog glanced at Rye, who was nervously shifting her unsheathed paws about. She lifted her head, forcing Blueclaw to slide further down her shoulders and towering above the wildcat's height. Blackleaf looked into her dark,

brown eyes.

"How much do you hate yourself?" Heidi said.

"What?" Blackleaf mewed.

"You know something that no one else knows, or will ever understand. Doomed to repeat the same things in your head over and over until you act on them. Are you right? Are they? It doesn't matter in the end. That's how it always goes, right?"

"I don't hate myself," Blackleaf eked.

"Right. You do hate yourself. But first, you hate what made you this way."

The medicine cat shook her head.

"That there's nothing you can do about it, and it's impossible to go back."

"Solestar didn't do this," Blackleaf whispered.

Rye's ears perked up.

"I just..." Blackleaf choked up. "I just wanted StarClan to speak to us. Maybe we wouldn't have had to fight so much. I just wanted everyone to be happy."

"Really?" Blueclaw interrupted, pushing Heidi's head down.

The medicine cat glared at the old deputy.

"You thought you could just end this war by calling on StarClan?"

Blackleaf bared her teeth.

"Did you want everyone to be happy? Or did you just want anyone to care after your attitude drove them all away."

"What do you want from me?" The medicine cat hissed.

"You-You are what? Fifteen moons or something? If there were no

war, you would be too young to be a medicine cat. Remember what I told you almost a half-moon ago at the bridge? About Littlestar? She did way worse than just running off to die. Clawed wildcat toms between their hind legs because she couldn't win fights. Assassinated a medicine cat in blind rage. Forced her clanmates to patrol territory not fit for the Place of No Stars. All under some misguided attempt to bring back the Stars by targeting three wildcats she considered evil. That goal consumed Littlestar's mind and the smoke her body. She failed."

Blackleaf lifted her forepaws to the edge of the pool and hissed at Blueclaw, who slid back onto Heidi's neck to lean closer. Neither flinched at the water droplets hitting their faces. Rye looked her over; the medicine cat's muscles bulged through her wet fur, which hid many of her small scratches. Much of the mud and scents were washed away.

"You have something to say?" Blackleaf yelled. "Say it! I don't care anymore!"

"You should care," Blueclaw growled. "Did you know Littlestar also almost killed Fleetheart?"

Blackleaf tensed up.

"Littlestar beat her for caring too much. She would have killed her friend if it was not for a missing fang. She did everything she could to keep from directing her anger to herself. Even after all that, she still had cats fight and die for her. My older littermate was one of them. You think wanting to bring back StarClan made everyone hate you? What about the cursed kitten over here? Wolfgang and Fleetheart probably like you. And Angelika admired you for trying to save her life while she was here. I bet she cares about you. You may be bitter, but you still have reasons to live and meet your goals. Not everyone has that. And if not for your clan, carry on for you and those who still believe in what you are doing."

Blackleaf turned around and lifted herself from the pool, sloshing water all over Rye. Sliding herself away, she looked up at the medicine cat's inflated chest and glistening claws. Her soaking wet fur was clear of all specs of mud, but her head was still dirty. She

focused straight at Blueclaw. The deputy did not flinch.

"Do you think it matters that any of them care!?" Blackleaf said. "I never cared about them. So what does it matter in the end? I disobeyed Solestar and ignored the plight of my comrades for some lofty pursuit of the Stars. *I* did that. They aren't wrong. *I am.* Because what did any of that get me in the end but beatings, threats, and disappointment."

Blueclaw's ears dropped. "That is what I am-am trying to tell you. This is not the end for you."

Blackleaf hissed. "I pushed Flyfoot away. I ignored the thoughts and fears of my comrades. I did not care about the blackcough. I told one of them our comrades and clan are separate ideas. And I aided Dovewhisker—an enemy medicine cat. And failed to fulfil her last request... Just let me be angry at myself..."

She shook the remaining water from her fur and was motionless after. Blackleaf had caught her reflection in the stilled pool. Blueclaw's fur settled when she saw the medicine cat's ears fall. She turned towards the entrance, stopping to look into Rye's eyes. The she-kit stared back into low pink eyes, heavy eyelids, and scratched brow. Heartbeats later Blackleaf slipped through the entrance hole, her beats through the snow outside nearly inaudible. The crunching of heavier pawsteps followed shortly after. Rye looked outside to see several warriors closely follow Blackleaf back towards the larger twoleg nests. She stood and walked towards the pool. Weight in her belly slowly moved to her thumping heartbeat as she stared into it and saw nothing from the reflection. Blueclaw slid off Heidi's neck and back onto her shoulder to allow the war dog to stretch.

"Sorry I pushed your head down," Blueclaw said.

Molenose and Heidi's ears perked up.

"I think that's the first time I've ever heard you apologize for anything," Heidi said. "Kitten, how are you?"

Rye glanced outside. "It is not fair she loads upon herself such a burden."

"There isn't always a choice, kitten," the war dog whispered.

Rye dipped a paw into the pool, drifting it around and scattering the light reflecting from it. Blueclaw watched it swirl about. She sighed and rested her chin on Heidi's neck. Molenose had closed his eyes and turned away from the center, muttering to himself while he prayed. Rye nodded and did the same, her paw still waving through the pool.

Chapter 41

More claws scraped across the cold gray-stone. Even with the sun blocked out and dry air flowing down the main tunnel, the den was damp with what remained of snowmelt in the bordering gutters. The sky-monsters hissing above did not stop any of the cats out of her vision from moving. The she-kit looked up through the silverwood vent; nothing but gray skies and specs of fresh snow falling into the den. She did not shake what fell on her away, hidden by her clean white fur. Claw marks adorned the ceiling. She counted twelve, all facing the entrance blocked with a plank of wood. She sighed, glancing at the entrance when she heard something bump against it. After some mumbling, the hidden guard outside tapped away with their claws out. A heartbeat alone with her thoughts, Rye let herself think of Blackleaf. She clenched the half-scar under her chest fur and closed her eyes. The plank was moved aside and covered again just as quickly. A tom held his ear left and right before moving towards her, his slight limp keeping him slow. Rye sat up straight when she spotted a glint of the tom's silver charm around his ankle. The clean fake-fur was replaced with a black feather lodged into the grooves of the cross-bound twoleg's limbs. His orange eyes were low, and he yawned when he finally made his way to the light and sat in front of her.

"Sorry you're hidden away in the meeting room," Clementstar kept his deep, monotone voice low. "But there are some things I can't let you learn about yet. We will be finished rotating soon enough."

Rye kept staring at the charm.

"And I think it's time we were clear with each other."

"There are things you want to know?" Rye tried to keep her composure.

"Like why you risked coming here alone in the first place."

Rye glanced at him, staring at her own paws.

"I had the guard sent away. It's just you and me. And I'll tell you whatever I can first. Anything to put you at ease—"

"Where is Blackleaf?" Rye said.

Clementstar tapped his charm. "Right. Well, she's gone into heat once more. She's back in the prison den, and we're trying to shift patrols to cover her scent. Plants are in short supply and the lavender vial is all used up. She isn't making a sound, but it's strong enough to be noticed by our patrolling toms on the surface."

Rye narrowed her eyes.

"Such a vile act towards a medicine cat certainly breaks the warrior code even if not explicitly stated. She won't be harmed. Blackleaf is a medicine cat first and a Shadow second. At least, that's how I see it."

"Is it... truly so dangerous?"

"Ordinarily, no. But this is why clan cats learn to control their urges to mate from time to time. If weather is against us, it could give positions away. Uncontrolled mating leads to overpopulation, like it did for the wildcats of LeafClan. I was hoping your talk with her at our sacred spot last night would've calmed her down. She'd better not be doing this on purpose. Blueclaw must've said something... Anything else?"

Rye shook her head. The tom took a few steps back and stretched his paws, flexing his claws. He was careful to lay on a spot clean enough to keep the feathered charm from getting dirty. The she-kit sighed, laying where she sat.

"What do you wish to know?" Rye said.

"You said UnderClan was in StarClan's vision for ending this war," Clementstar growled. "What did you mean by that?"

"Nothing. It was not the true reason I wished into UnderClan."

"And the real reason was?"

"Blackleaf. I was doing this for her."

Clementstar's ears perked up. "Seriously?"

Rye nodded. "StarClan's reason for incarnating me here is to pacify the warring clans of this area. But I cannot help but spare those whose lives are valuable to StarClan. And to me... Blackleaf is everything I strive to be in an Incarnate, even if she has no powers."

"Your powers are debatable," Clementstar grunted. "And so is your claim to be a reincarnation of a long-dead cat. But most of the clan believes you are and actually give cats blackcough. I must act accordingly."

"Is that why I am hidden away while you shift patrols?" Rye slid closer to the tom.

"More or less. But, honestly, I don't care." The leader stretched to his side, exposing a scar that ran from the bottom of his chest to the end of his hind legs. His fur had fallen short enough for Rye to spot its clean, singular line. Clementstar was busy staring up through the silverwood vent. He glanced in her direction. "You know where a scar like this comes from?"

Rye shook her head.

"Twolegs... I'm sure you know by now I'm not from here. While I was in *paris*, I caused a lot of problems. I ate too much, hurt too many other pets, and mated with every she-cat I could find. I wasn't born during the Great Sky War, so I had little context to why it was so easy to get away with it all. This scar is what remains of that life. The twolegs cut me open and took my ability to mate. I don't think they did it right. Never made me any less anxious than I always was living there."

Rye's ears perked up. "I was not aware such a thing was possible!"

"Neither was I, but my owners had a lot compared to others. They found a way to keep me in line... until they were taken away. Not sure what they did, but they were just gone one night. No she-cats, no twoleg nest to defend me from the trouble I caused, so I left.

Took one of their shinies with me." He raised his black paw with the charm on it. "Wound up riding all sorts of monsters to get here. Picked up a lot of hiding skills on the way, and knowledge of clan life from the ruins of many, many clans."

"Cat clans are known to be xenophobic," Rye said. "My herald told me I could use their fear against them one day. Though I should not be, I am thankful Blackleaf does not fear me."

Clementstar sighed. "This really was all for her?"

Rye nodded.

"And here I am with this whole story. What was I really expecting from a five moon-old kit?" He scratched behind his ears, unable to extend his paw far. "Most of UnderClan is suspicious of you, Rye. But now I see you're not much different from Dovewhisker."

When the tom was done scratching, he sat upright. An ear from both of them lifted to the vent when a sky-monster passed at lower altitude. Rye felt the rumble in both her ears, folding them flat. Some loose snow fell onto the tom, who made no effort to shake it off. He glanced at the sky, but could not find it. His ears swiveled toward the entrance. The faint scrapes and patters of the clan echoed through once more.

"I admire Dovewhisker's choice," Clementstar said. "In secret, of course. Selfish, but none can argue she didn't do it for our moral future. But I always believed the biggest moral threat we faced was Solestar. She's like Blackleaf, but without peers to keep her in check. No deputies among the Shadows. She was born during the Great Sky War. I wasn't. So I have no idea what goes through that head of hers. She's like everything wrong with me while I was in *paris*."

Rye tapped her paw. "Last night, Blackleaf made a small attempt to defend her former leader."

"Hmm?" Clementstar narrowed his eyes.

"Staying with Heidi's pack has taught me a great deal about

motivations and past experiences." Rye looked down at her chest. "How it can tear someone apart from the inside out, with no way to stop it. Perhaps Solestar has such problems."

"I've personally stayed out of Heidi's business," Clementstar yawned. "But I don't care one way or another. For UnderClan, Solestar is a problem... Will you still try to escape? If I leave you unguarded?"

Rye's ears perked up.

"There's you, Molenose, and now Blackleaf. I can't waste warriors guarding you three all day and night. Not while we have no medicine cat. I hate this, but I have to trust you not to try and run off. Can I trust you?"

Rye glanced up as the sky-monsters screeched passed, much further up than before. Two black specks zoomed across the sky before she could focus on them. She even reared up briefly to look closer through the vent, but they were gone. Clementstar slid back and glanced away. Rye's ears perked back up when she dropped back to her spot. But she kept her eyes firmly on the small glow of sunlight through the clouds.

"I no longer have reason to leave," Rye whispered. "Blackleaf is why I am here, even if she does not like me."

The leader nodded, standing and shaking his fur. Rye kept her eyes on her chest as Clementstar turned towards the entrance.

"Thank you for letting me see her," Rye said.

The older tom glanced at her, and walked towards the entrance. When he slid the wood plank away, he stopped the first warrior to pass. Whispering something to them, they guarded the den as he blocked the entrance again. Rye still stared at her chest, parting the fur to reveal the remains of a deep scab. Half had already fallen off and left a scar. She brushed her fur over it and looked to the clouds. The sky-monsters were much quieter than before.

Chapter 42

Rye was practically dragged through the tunnel. Still drowsy, she looked through the silverwood vents she passed while riding on the UnderClan warrior's back. The half-moon shined brightly, not a cloud in sight. Light passed through the holes in the vents and illuminated the dark tunnel to their destination. On reaching it, another warrior guarding an entrance pushed away a wood plank and let the one carrying Rye toss her inside. They quickly blocked the entrance before Rye could scramble to her paws.

"Stay put," the warrior whispered. "We need to figure out what's going on."

The sound of claws echoing down the tunnel made Rye's fur crawl. She backed away from the entrance, tripping over the body of another occupant. Keeping her balance, her heartbeat quickened when she recognized the white fur and narrow, pink eyes of the other. The scent she gave off hit her when the medicine cat stirred and lifted herself from the pile of mud she slept in. Rye's ears perked up. She backed away to give Blackleaf room to stand. Glancing at the entrance, then at her, Rye's chest thumped and her fur spiked. The short yelp she heard echoed from a further tunnel fully woke her up. Blackleaf shook the mud from her face and took several steps towards the back wall.

"I... I think we are under attack," Rye whispered.

Blackleaf did not respond, her tail curling tight between her hind legs.

"Be ready to move. We may be escorted deeper into camp."

Rye tried to keep her composure, but the silenced screech of another distant cat made the blood under her fur creep. Her legs began to shake, and she backed even further into the den than Blackleaf. The adjacent tunnel was soon filled with the tapping of claws that drew closer with every heartbeat. Blackleaf's eyes

widened and her ears folded back. When Rye saw this, she crouched and stood in front of the medicine cat, ignoring her potent scent. The wood planks were slammed away from the entrance. A gruff warrior jumped through and looked around. He stood in front of Rye, his fur shooting up when he noticed Blackleaf.

"Her heat's going to get us caught." A younger warrior stood at the entrance, his beady eyes glancing between the older tom and the outside tunnel. "I caught her scent on the surface earlier today. It's too strong!"

"It's a bit weaker than it was before," the older tom said, stepping behind the medicine cat and motioning both forward. "We just need to get her deeper into camp."

More claws tapping echoed throughout the tunnels. The tom pushed Blackleaf forward and out the den; she did not resist. Rye followed close behind the medicine cat, leaving the younger warrior in the rear. They returned to the smaller tunnel, moonlight guiding them towards one of the main tunnels. The warriors were careful to keep their claws sheathed as they ran. Blackleaf and Rye did the same. They went right when the reached the main tunnel, hearing a yowl to their left.

"How'd they even get this far?" the younger tom mewed.

"They clearly confused our deep patrols," the older tom said. His fur stood on end and his claws unsheathed. "Regardless, they can follow Blackleaf's heat."

"Then what do we do?"

"We hope the deep patrols are holding back enough to force them to retreat. And we move faster."

The young warrior pushed against Blackleaf, urging her to run faster. The medicine cat still could not keep up with the older tom. Rye glanced back; Blackleaf was straining to keep even her slower pace, baring her teeth and growling whenever their escorts tried to move faster. Finally, the older warrior fell back to her and lifted her over his shoulders. He took off down the tunnel with Blackleaf

holding on with her claws. Rye and the young warrior followed faster. Another cry was silenced further down the tunnel. Rye knew it was closer. The moonlight of several silverwood vents lit their path. The warriors stopped when they spotted a dead clanmate under one of them. It lay in a pool of its own blood, the backs of its hind legs and throat slashed open. Eyes wide and mouth frozen, it forced Rye to hold back a squeak when she saw it up close.

"Impossible," the older tom said. "They're already ahead of us?"

"Behind us!"

The lead warrior rushed past Rye, tossing Blackleaf from his shoulders and onto hers. Both she-cats collapsed with the impact.

"Keep going forward!" one of them yelled.

Both stepped far into the unlit dark, leaving Rye and Blackleaf around the dead cat. The she-kit tried to pushed the other forward.

"We have to go, Blackleaf," Rye said.

The medicine cat was frozen. Her nose twitched, and her claws immediately retracted. No matter how much Rye pushed, she stayed put. She stared down the tunnel after giving up, unable to scent anything other than Blackleaf.

"No way," Blackleaf mumbled. "How is she here!?"

"Who?" Rye said.

A tom's yelp took her attention. Her younger escort was shoved into the light further behind them by another cat covered in mud. It jumped on him and bit his shoulder, the young tom struggling to fight it off. His older clanmate jumped on the mystery cat, crunching down on its throat and tossing it into an unlit corner closer to the she-cats. Its eyes were motionless, its body twitching. The scent of blood nearly overpowered Blackleaf's heat as Rye curled her nose and struggled to keep her position. She locked her legs in place. Two more unknown cats jumped from the shadows at the younger tom. His clanmate snatched one in his jaws; the snap of its neck echoed down the tunnel. It was tossed away like the first.

The other cat still wrestled with the young tom, pinning him and clawing at his neck. He grunted and hissed as more of his blood splattered onto the ground. Finally, he leaned up and bit his attacker's throat, tossing him behind. When it jumped at him, his older clanmate once more leapt from the shadows and dragged it towards the wall. Rye's fur crawled when she heard the echo of two deep snaps. The attacker was tossed into the light she was under, the flat part of its head stained with blood. The white of its skull poked through, shattered.

"Gah!"

The older tom turned to see the younger one's throat sliced clean open. He was limp, his neck and chest stained deep red. The three attackers that killed him jumped at the older tom together. He leapt back and sliced through the air, hitting them all, before a fourth darted under them and slammed into him. The two collapsed, but the tom already had his jaws around its neck. Before he could toss the attacker away, the other three leapt at him and started clawing.

"Run!" the UnderClan warrior shouted.

Rye pushed against Blackleaf, but the medicine cat was still frozen. Her claws pinned her to the gray-stone. The she-kit held in a scream when he saw her defender tossed at her, his eyes clawed out and oozing towards her paws. He swiped several times at the air, unable to stand. She looked up, anywhere but the dying tom. Blackleaf watched one of the attackers stagger from the shadows and push its claws into the back of his neck. Only when he fell still did Rye dare look forward. A larger cat pushed past the attackers and stepped into the light. The large brown and orange spots on her fur did nothing to hide the small matts in it. Her face, flanks, and paws were covered in a thick layer of mud, her steps towards the pair silent. Towering over both, she bared her fangs and growled; it was cut short by a tap on the shoulder.

"Our escape might be cut off soon," one of the attackers said. "We don't know how many tunnels they have under the river."

Twitching her ear, she continued growling. Blackleaf was frozen, locked to the she-cat's burning green eyes. Rye pushed herself under

the medicine cat and tried lifting her; one of the attackers chomped down on her tail, dragging her yelping away.

"You two are coming with me." The she-cat growled deeply.

"Solestar..." Blackleaf was shaking. "How..."

"Even the birds know when you're in heat, Blackleaf," Solestar growled. "*You* lead us here."

Her paw shot into Blackleaf's chest, dropping her. One of her warriors lifted her onto its back, another clamping her tail in its mouth. She slammed her paw into Rye's head, knocking her dizzy. Her vision blurred for heartbeats, Rye kept her eyes on the large Shadow leader who personally carried her. The other cats kept their distance, focused on Blackleaf. Even the one with her tail in its mouth was afraid to get any closer than it had to. Rye shook her dizziness away and stuck her claws into Solestar's thick fur. She did not flinch.

"Make a move and I'll kill Blackleaf right here," Solestar hissed, beginning to run back into the shadows the group attacked from. "Your herald wants you back alive."

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She was tossed to the ground, snow beneath her feet. The wind had stilled shortly before the group surfaced. The last Shadow warrior was leaving the nest she was tossed from, its floor creaking whenever it took a step. The charred ruins of similar twoleg nests surrounded her once more. All hollowed out, all made of red-stone. Despite the damage, they still towered far above the cats, blocking the view of neighboring twoleg nests and muffling the ambience. The one she was under still had a working light, the rest of it came from the other twoleg lights high above the deserted thunderpath and the moon. The mud that covered her paws was made frigid by the snow. Looking down at them, Rye saw what remained of the

UnderClan tom's blood. She shook it off and glanced about. Her heart steadied when she spotted Blackleaf. She was surrounded by several Shadow warriors, one still with her tail in its jaws. Solestar was standing away from them, near another group.

"Our Prophet!" Rye's ears perked up at a familiar voice.

Dozens of cats of the other group surrounded her, Kritz leading them. His white and black fur had extra dozens of long, gray hairs poking from it. Despite the gray in his muzzle, he still leapt to the side of the she-kit and stared at Solestar.

"I am overjoyed to see you, my Prophet!" Kritz's voice was shaking. "Warrior-rah, formation!"

The Covenant cats formed a semi-circle around her and the old tom, keeping their distance. On seeing it, the Shadows formed a line in front of them. Solestar took the front. The pair keeping Blackleaf were further back; she made no moves. Her scent lingered in the air. Rye rubbed her muzzle against Kritz's cheek.

"I am unharmed," Rye said. "It is good to see you, at last."

"Y-You humble me with your affection." He faced the warrior-rah. "Our Prophet has returned!" he shouted. They started to cheer.

"*Has been* returned," Solestar barked, waving some of her warriors away. "Now for your end of the deal."

Kritz's ears flattened. The warrior-rah stopped cheering and stood at attention. All kept their eyes on whichever Shadow warrior was in front of them, holding steady as some hissed and snarled at them. Solestar held her paw up and silenced them.

"Kritz," She growled.

"We need time to prepare," he said. "And our Prophet makes the final decision—"

"That shouldn't be a problem. Your camp will be invaded two nights from now. You'll be out by then if you know what's good for that demon-kit of yours."

Some of the warrior-rah growled at Solestar's words. The old tom sighed, his head dropping. "Of course. I will discuss the terms that... I agreed to, now."

"Perfect," Solestar said. She glanced at Blackleaf.

"What will you do with her?" Rye did not take her eyes from the medicine cat.

"Punish her as we would any cat who crosses us," Solestar growled.

"She does not deserve it. She has done—"

"You have *no right* to question us, dark-spawn!" Solestar spat, lashing her bobbed tail. "Herald, take that kit off our territory."

"This is still near Covenant land," Kritz said.

"Not in two nights. That's borrowed territory, now," the Shadow leader growled.

Kritz did not take his eyes from the snow, and the warrior-rah did not take theirs from the Shadows as they moved away. Blackleaf kept her head down until Rye lost sight of her behind a twoleg nest. Solestar was the last to leave. Rye saw the Shadow leader's ears flatten against her head before she disappeared, the tension in her muscles relaxing. The warrior-rah fanned out and formed a circle around Rye and Kritz. The old tom threw himself to his belly, exposing the back of his neck and nearly burying his head in the shallow snow.

"My Prophet, *please* forgive me for speaking on your behalf. It is a blasphemy of unforgivable proportions and I understand if you wish to have me executed. But I beg you to look past this failing to see what I may still offer you. I—"

"Kritz, stop," Rye said earnestly. She lifted the tom from the snow and back to his paws. "What did you do?"

"Eleven nights ago, Solestar approached us. She said one of her senior warriors spotted you inside the vest of the pack leader, Heidi, while they were discussing a possible dog sighting. I denied it, but

she did not care. She offered to retrieve you for us instead of wiping us out. In return, we would leave *berlin* and send word to all incoming Covenant cats to return to their respective branches. Blackleaf's capture and loss of control of her heat gave her the opportunity. The final decision was mine. We met at the scheduled meeting places every night since you left, hoping you would show. Spare the elite warrior-rah, for they only wished to see your brilliance unharmed. I will sing your praise until my death if my punishment is exile, but if I must be executed, I understand never to question the word of a Prophet Incarnate ever again in this life or the next—"

Rye pushed her paw against the tom's muzzle. "Get a hold of yourself, herald." The motion stretched the scab on her chest. She winced, gripping it.

"My Prophet!" Kritz parted the she-kit's fur, his eyes widening.

"Do not fret. The wound has mostly scarred and it was treated well." She pushed the tom's paw from her chest. "I was afraid one of them spotted me that evening. It was my carelessness. You have done no wrong... Did they believe I was there to help UnderClan?"

Kritz shook his head. "Solestar assumed nothing. But because many Shadow cats are frightened of your powers, she threatened to turn her full attention to us while you were away. We agreed to her terms, believing we could not leave you alone in this region should we have chosen to fight an unwinnable battle. I am truly sorry, my Prophet, to the depths of my heart."

Rye turned away from them, looking at the corner Solestar's group disappeared behind. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to shake the images of fighting from her mind. The moon was even brighter, illuminating what the twoleg lights did not and reflecting from the nests' remaining panes of clear-stone. The warrior-rah continued looking at their surroundings, expanding their circle at each rustle and snap they heard. Finally, she faced Kritz. His head was still low.

"There is something I wish to do," Rye said.

"Your word is final," Kritz nodded. "The only way to repent this unforgivable sin is to follow your word unquestioned."

"I rely on your skepticism more than I realize, Kritz. I have learned much in UnderClan territory, and wish you to never stop questioning my orders."

"As you wish." He bowed.

Rye raised her tail straight up. "The wind is in our favor. If we take a certain position in the Shadow's camp, we can listen as to what they will do next."

Kritz lifted his head. "Why not allow the warrior-rah spy, as they always have? You will be in great danger by doing this."

"I am counting on most of the Shadow's warriors being recalled from their patrol routes. What remain will guard this underground passage they attacked through. UnderClan will regroup, and Solestar... seemed to take it personally."

"My Prophet? What do you mean she—"

"Our hole of opportunity is shrinking. We must move now if we are to outmaneuver their recalling patrols."

Rye took off down the thunderpath; Kritz and the warrior-rah followed close behind, keeping their steps light. Before they surrounded her, Rye glanced to her right into the twoleg nest she emerged from. A pile of red-stones was scattered across its floor.

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Many had already packed themselves within the large clearing in their camp, and more of all sizes were pouring in from all sides. The gate near the front saw dozens entering simultaneously. Bright twoleg lights made up for the waning moonlight as thin clouds began to drift through the sky. She could hear their idle mews while

barely being out of earshot. Rye turned to see the last of the warrior-rah scramble to the top of the hill, rolling once to cover themselves in a thin layer of snow. The two nests that formed their camp's dens were just slightly taller than the destroyed ones in the backlands. The one in far better condition had Shadow warriors pouring from its entrance. No one emerged from the other one. The cats walked across the raised, gray-stone platform between the two nests and the clearing. She spotted Blackleaf lying next to Solestar on the platform, head down. The ones who walked past gave them no second glance. Rye slid herself slightly to the right to better hide behind a large rock holding a massive sheet of white fake-fur.

We must be atop their medicine den, Rye thought. *It would need to be protected from the weather. Especially inside a twoleg structure such as this. All gray-stone, no echo, it must be one left over from the Great Sky War. And the occupants must have blackcough, or more cats than three would have emerged from it. Their senses will be dulled, and any others spotting us could mistake us for their own allies thanks to being downwind. Clever hiding spot, Kritz... Still, the sheer number of them. Despite whoever is ill or dead, there are well over a hundred Shadows down there. And many more are still coming.*

The cats began to jeer when Solestar raised her head. Rye kept her eyes on Blackleaf. She had new blood stains on her fur, but acted uninjured. A young, brown cat keeping to her side, however, was. Rye barely spotted a large scar on her muzzle. Her eyes narrowed at the medicine cat, whispering something in her ear and smacking the side of her belly. Another held a patch of fake-fur to her side and helped her off the platform when Solestar waved them away.

It is not holding that fake-fur the right way. That cannot be a medicine cat. Have they been kept away from camp?

Solestar held up her paw. The crowd of cats grew silent.

"Tonight," she shouted, "we claim two small victories. We have pacified the presence of that Star Covenant branch *and* recovered the greatest threat to this clan since the formation of UnderClan. With the Covenant gone, we can withdraw many patrols from the backlands and show those cowards no matter how deep they hide underground, they can't escape their Shadows!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd. Many waved their tails through the air.

"Since the start of the Great Sky War many moons ago, we have been threatened by twoleg warriors, sky-monsters, the death of our leaders, and raids from desperate animals. But the twoleg warriors lost, the sky-monsters stopped attacking, I survive our leaders, and we've even captured and made a whimpering mess of a war dog. But occasionally—" Solestar snatched Blackleaf by the neck under her claws and forced her towards the front. "we need to remind ourselves disloyalty is the most dangerous threat of all!"

The crowd was hissing and yelping at their former medicine cat. Some tossed snow at her, careful not to hit their leader. Others did not yell, but had angry scowls on their faces. Rye could not find one sympathetic cat among them.

Solestar pushed Blackleaf away, who gave no resistance. "Since her apprentice training began, I have excused her shrew behavior because of her zeal to StarClan and her commitment to becoming our first clan-born medicine cat. But, in StarClan's continued absence, she has made us second-guess her motives. She has released captives, kept secrets about dangerous paths into our backlands, and abandoned us during a winning battle with UnderClan. *She* lost us that fight!"

The warriors continued hissing.

"She has indirectly killed seventeen of our warriors. Including tonight's raid to retrieve her. *Seventeen!*"

Solestar smacked Blackleaf across her muzzle. New blood dripped from her nose as she struggled to keep her balance. Her leader pushed her back down to a crouch. Rye's heart skipped a beat when she heard some of the groups of cats chanting to maim her. Their leader held up her paw to quiet them again. Blackleaf kept her same blank expression, her eyes to the ground.

"We retrieved her uninjured," Solestar said. "She must've cooperated with the under cats for her life." Blackleaf's eyes shot to her leader. "Don't look at me like that. How many of your comrades are

suffering from blackcough? Fighting for their lives in that medicine den. Did you think of them when you abandoned your duties...? What about *them*?"

The large leader forced Blackleaf's head up so she had to see the crowd. They continued their hisses and threats. She whispered something in her ear. Blackleaf appeared to shut her eyes and whimper. She whispered again, with more force and baring her teeth. The medicine cat shook her head. Solestar released her and faced the clearing.

"Before we recovered her, I asked the senior warriors accompanying me what would be done with her. I suggested captivity or... execution. They said it was too lenient."

The crowd kept hissing. Rye's belly churned at the thought of Blackleaf's punishment. But she spotted Solestar's paws shaking when she mentioned execution. Her ears were also folded to the back of her head. She reached out her paw and gently rested it on the medicine cat's neck. Rye practically held her breath.

"I thought of a way to ensure she'll never hurt us again, and set an example for future incidents. She will be stripped of her medicine cat title and given kits by force. And she will *never* interfere with clan affairs again."

Solestar calmed herself. The crowd was quiet for only moments before erupting in praise for Solestar. Rye pinned her ears down when she heard toms offering to do it themselves. She deepened her spot in the snow, her fur shuttering at the leader's words. Blackleaf kept her head down, her legs beginning to shake and her nose still bleeding.

She is making a spectacle of this. Rye's heartbeat thumped even faster. Her claws unsheathed and tapped the gray-stone beneath the snow. *I was told many among the clans have lost their faith, but this. This is beyond punishment. It is savagery. Everything I heard about Solestar's cruelty from Heidi is true, and more. It is no wonder I was born to destroy this clan. A true believer in StarClan would never commit to such a vile act towards one who is supposed to be blessed by them... Blackleaf, you must run. Resist. Do something. I cannot help you. I am*

useless once more.

"I already have a tom in mind," Solestar said. "Wolfgang!"

The crowd fell quiet, murmuring and glancing among each other. The left side closest to the medicine den even made room to the gray-stone platform for him to approach. When he did not show, some began growling.

Solestar hissed above the crowd. "I know you're listening. You're the only Axin Mess survivor who'd so blatantly disobey orders to stay on patrol. Approach!"

Some of the cats began yelling out 'traitor'. He still did not show. Many were growing restless, fanning through the crowd themselves to find him. Solestar slashed her claws through the snow.

"If you won't show, I will break this one's neck and have you mate with the carcass, instead! Now, Wolfgang!"

Some of the cats in the crowd folded their ears back, no longer chanting. The rest were nearly silent. Even the angry warriors stopped searching. Rye focused on Blackleaf. Her expression finally changed; her eyes were wide and her paws were still shaking. She kept to her belly, but her eyes never left her leader. After moments of silence, a large gray and black tom emerged from the medicine den below Rye. She watched the large sheet of fake-fur blow open as he left, several cats moving to pin it under rocks and close it again. Anyone in his way parted to let the scraggly-furred tom pass. His tail flicked from side to side, his bright orange eyes never leaving Solestar. He hopped onto the platform and stopped just short of the pair.

"Losing control of her heat is how we found her in the first place," Solestar said, addressing the crowd. "She knows she has only herself to blame. What better way to punish a traitor than by forcing them to give rise to a new, loyal litter? If StarClan won't judge this useless medicine cat, I will!"

The crowd's energy returned, jeering and hissing at the medicine cat once more. Wolfgang's growls were overpowered. Blackleaf growled

as well, leaning close to Solestar.

"You raised me!" she shouted. "You treated me like kin! Why—"

Blackleaf's muzzle was smashed into the snow by Solestar. "You don't have a say in this, traitor," she hissed, her voice breaking. "You turned your back on me. When I needed you most, you gave me nothing. Seventeen warriors are dead because of *you!* I can't just ignore that. Not this time."

Solestar motioned her bobbed tail towards Wolfgang.

"Get behind her."

Wolfgang did not move. The crowd became quiet. Those in front drew closer to the base of the platform. Blackleaf averted her eyes from them. All of them looked at her.

"I said take your position, Wolfgang!" she hissed. "Remember what happens if you don't."

The older tom took small steps towards Blackleaf, as short a distance he could manage. The whole way to her his fur crept on end. His clawless paws cringed on instinct. The crowd was near silent. Some looked away. Solestar nodded, motioning him to move faster. Eventually he was behind the medicine cat, staring directly at the ground between her hind legs. Rye watched Solestar shove Blackleaf's head into the snow, forcing her hind legs higher. Blackleaf gave little resistance, keeping her wide eyes on the crowd. She clawed at the gray-stone beneath the snow, each time echoing throughout the clearing. Her tail slid itself aside; Wolfgang only glanced at it before looking back at the snow beneath her legs, batting his nose with his paw. His ears twitched occasionally. His fangs would bare every time Solestar growled. The tom even looked past Blackleaf and into the silent crowd. Rye's heart pounded against her chest when Wolfgang rested a paw on the medicine cat's lower back. Blackleaf clenched her eyes shut and braced herself. Her claws scraped even more; the tom's ears twitched in kind.

"What are you waiting for?" Solestar's growl seethed into her words. "Blackleaf's always been lusting after you in secret. You have

instincts, too. Bite her scruff. Climb over her. Do *something*."

He continued to stare for a moment longer, flexing his paw on Blackleaf's back. But Rye breathed a sigh of relief as the tom slid his paw from her and stepped back, only looking at her when her tail covered between her legs once more. The crowd started whispering. Rye saw some of them shifting around and nervously twitching their tails. The scent of Blackleaf's heat reached Rye and the Covenant cats.

"I'm not doing anything," Wolfgang said.

"What?" Solestar growled. "I told you what happens if you—"

"I promised I wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. What kind of leader orders something like this?"

"Don't speak to me like some unruly kit. Her *former* comrades demanded this, this... it's the only way she'll learn."

"It's going to teach her how to resent her clanmates all over again. Or turn her against the only ones in the clan she trusts. And none of them are even here to object to this."

"You weren't supposed to be here, either."

Rye spotted Blackleaf's ears perk up when Wolfgang defended her. She breathed for a moment, but the large cats were staring each other down. The tom set his eyes on Solestar. The crowd was still silent, many petrified by the two's actions.

"You and these cowards have been torturing her for a while," Wolfgang growled to the crowd. "Why do you think she left in the first place?"

"I'm making her a queen, not putting her to death!" Solestar snapped, pressing harder on Blackleaf's neck. "They expect punishment. Cruel punishment. Death was too lenient, they said. And such a heinous punishment is fitting of any traitor."

Wolfgang narrowed his eyes, sliding his tail to Blackleaf's. "Solestar, listen to yourself. Do you know what you're asking me to do?"

"*Of course I do!*" Her muzzle trembled as she spoke. Her grip on Blackleaf loosened just a bit. "Do you think I want to stand here and hold her down while some foreign-born tom humiliates her? She betrayed all of us! She betrayed me... She said I treated her like kin." Her voice began to break. "I raised her. I taught her everything I know. I gave her so many chances. I never limited her potential. I wanted her to be the best of our clan. To have *her* name in the tales of our most famous ancestors countless seasons from now. It brings me *no joy* to hurt my Blackpaw."

"Then don't do this," Wolfgang growled. "Don't punish her like some murderous outcast."

"She *is* an outcast." Solestar's voice still trembled. "She led to the deaths of our comrades. She ran from her responsibilities and treated her own worse as she aged. She's not the Blackpaw I enjoyed the company of so much. She's changed. Blackleaf is a delusional mess. I didn't raise her to be this way!"

The cats yelped in support for Solestar. Their rallying cries made Blackleaf's ears fall completely flat and kept her on her belly. Amidst Solestar's waning grip, she focused on her leader. Her whole body shook. She did not struggle. Her claws stayed dug into the snow. Her tail curled around her leg. Rye's heart skipped a beat when she saw how her leader's words affected Blackleaf. She curled her ears in, but forced herself to keep listening. The tom looked out into the crowd, some of the cats hissing at him.

"Blackleaf is *not* a mess!" Wolfgang hissed, pointing at his leader. "You are."

"Don't you *dare* turn this against me!" Strength returned to Solestar's voice. "I did not push her to do what she's done. Now she's hurt her comrades just as bad as she's hurting me. They demand retribution. Punishment I'd put any traitor through. Is it fair for me to deny them, just because I love her?"

Wolfgang forced himself to look into Blackleaf's eyes, slowly cringing his head in her direction. They were wide and still fixed on Solestar. But she took a quick glance at him. She unwrapped her tail from her leg and returned his tail-brushing with her own, stopping

her shakes.

"This isn't the way to punish her," Wolfgang sighed, trying to calm himself. "Banish her. Banish us both. I'll make sure she never sets paw in *berlin* again."

"Do you think I'm some lenient horse-brain?" Solestar retightened her grip on Blackleaf's neck. "Even if you left this peninsula and went all the way around, you could be on the other side of that river in less than a quarter-moon, giving up our numbers to the under cats."

Wolfgang hissed. "Then what? She's young enough to be my own kit, and I'm supposed to pin her down and make her a queen!? That's disgusting!"

"This is disgusting for you? If the rumors are true, you took a younger mate while you were with AchseClan. A Shortfang?"

Wolfgang froze, his tail dropping from the medicine cat's. He turned to face her; she shook her head and clenched her muzzle. The muscles in the tom's face relaxed, but Blackleaf kept shaking her head. The crowd was silent.

"She was appointed a warrior shortly after they started fighting LeafClan. I'm guessing she was your apprentice or something. And too young to be promoted, perhaps? Six, five moons? Younger?"

Wolfgang's fur spiked and his muscles flexed through his thick fur. "Were you spying on me and Blackleaf the night we were alone?"

"You seem to be the only senior warrior who consistently disobeys me," Solestar said. "I keep an eye on you... Now, I'd say that apprentice-mate of yours developed quickly? Things just 'grew from there', I suppose. Pity she didn't survive the journey here. I would've loved to know what her perverted mind was thinking when she fell for a tom several times her age."

"Don't push me," Wolfgang growled, glaring at his leader. "Don't you dare push this any further."

"I'm not afraid of some clawless old tom... You spent that whole

night alone with my Blackpaw. Why shouldn't I believe you two haven't already mated in secret? Corrupted her with that damaged mind of yours. But here she is, fifteen moons of age, and *she's* too young. Hypocrite! Shortfang was even younger and you had no problem with that. For you, force-mating her should be like reliving pleasant memories with your kit-apprenti—"

He leapt onto Solestar. The rest of the clan hardly had time to react, but did not move. They tumbled across the platform. Rye heard every one of their grunts and hisses. Wolfgang smacked Solestar's face over and over, grunting from the force of every strike to the belly he took. He hopped off her short of breath and kneeling a bit. Eventually one of his paws gave out.

Rye's ears perked up. She raised herself up—just enough to keep under cover of the snow. Blackleaf had already stood, looking at the tom who motioned her back. Before Solestar could stand, the tom lunged at her and smacked her face again. He did not let up. Several blows connected, all staggering his leader further back.

Solestar leapt out of range. Her fur spiked. And all her fangs were brought to bear. She loosed a cry that made even Wolfgang freeze. She leapt onto the injured warrior. Blow after blow, cut after cut. Wolfgang's face devolved to a shredded mess of red fur and shallow scratches he couldn't counter. He jumped back; she leapt forward and kept clawing.

"Wolfgang!" Blackleaf shouted. She shook all over, failing to move her paws.

The senior warrior clenched his eyes shut, wiping the blood from them. Solestar was already on top of him. One heavy thrust through the air all the way across his chest and neck. The tom thumped to his side gasping for air.

"*Wolfgang!*"

Blackleaf leapt to the tom's side. She pressed a paw onto his neck. Blood had already spilled past the snow and stained the gray-stone. She licked the shaking tom's forehead, moving her paw from his neck. Blackleaf began to shake as well. Her breaths became deeper.

As the tom's movements slowed, she began to heave and buried her face in his shoulder. The tom's eyes wide; they made Rye shudder. She watched the medicine cat's tail curl around his. The crowd was silent, not one murmur or growl. They all watched Wolfgang's body fall limp and bleed out. Solestar's growl broke the hush. She clamped down on Blackleaf's scruff and threw her away from the body.

"Eighteen warriors," she growled. "And this one won't even get a proper vigil."

She smacked Blackleaf across the face with the back of her blood-stained paw. The medicine cat let herself fall to the ground. But Solestar smacked her again, and again. Rye's eyes darted between the beating and the tom's body.

You did not kill him, Blackleaf. Rye ignored a tug on her leg from one of her allies. *Clementstar was right. Solestar is dangerous. Everything she has been through from the Great Sky War must have warped her mind in ways I cannot fathom. I care little for her difficult upbringing. I only wish to see her dead... for what she is doing to Blackleaf.* Her claws flexed beneath the snow. *Blackleaf is not a mess.*

Blackleaf slowly stood. She did not wipe Wolfgang's blood from her face. She simply looked at the crowd of cats. And when she did, the hisses and taunts returned. The jeers, the claw rakes through the air, the eyes. All directed at her. She glossed over all of them, looking as many in the eyes as she could. Her ears were tucked back as far as they could go. Her fur was flat, tail wrapped around her hind leg again. She started panting; The toms began to yelp and growl, and the she-cats hissed and sniffed the air. Solestar's ears were low for just a moment. Her bobbed tail shook a bit. She slammed her paw down on Blackleaf's scruff again.

"It is time for us to return to our patrols," she proclaimed. "We have left ourselves vulnerable for too long. Make no mistake; Wolfgang would be alive right now if Blackleaf had not interfered. But the loss of a senior warrior who refused to fight and had old comrades in the under cats is of little consequence." Blackleaf whimpered under her leader's paw. "I will deal with her, believe me. She won't escape what she was condemned to. More importantly, with the

presence of the Star Covenant gone, UnderClan's days are numbered!"

Some of the crowd began to cheer as they dispersed. Others were still hissing at Blackleaf. A few were called to the platform by their leader. They nudged Wolfgang's body, picking it up and taking it towards the back entrance of camp. Rye observed the crowd. Some had their neck fur standing on end, their tails low or dragging. Others held their tails high, triumphantly yelping to each other. None stayed back to speak to Solestar, or follow Wolfgang's body. All walked with purpose. They headed for the fresh-kill piles or to the sides of camp. Others ran towards the silverpath and the massive twoleg structures on the other side. Rye's neck fur shot up when she saw Blackleaf still pinned under Solestar's paw. An all-white she-cat was called forward, her fur flattening and her legs shaking. Her thick tail carelessly dragged through the snow. The leader's head dropped lower the further away the crowd got. Rye's claws pushed a small amount of snow over the edge of the medicine den; she was quickly dragged backward by her tail.

"I apologize for the crude gesture, my Prophet," one of the warrior-rah whispered. "The Shadows are returning to patrol. Our escape quickly closes."

Tempted for another look, she shook her head and turned around. The other warrior-rah rose from the snow and formed up around her as they bounded straight away from her spot atop the medicine den. Running around the massive hole in the roof and to their right, they headed for the backlands furthest from the back entrance to the Shadow's camp. None were ahead or approaching.

Rye's claws were numb under the snow as she ran. *Not one shaking paw. No blank expressions, no fear. Only that she-cat called to stay behind. The rest are perfectly content with the outcome. As if killing some old tom in front of them is some kind of compromise. Threatening to have one of their own violated in front of everyone to satisfy some disgusting argument for punishment. No medicine cats present. Only one Axin Mess survivor spotted—and killed. Solestar must be dealt with, somehow. Blackleaf is no safer right now than she was in UnderClan's camp. Nothing is stopping this from happening again. For her sake, I must do... something!*

The group turned the corner of a twoleg nest and found themselves back in the weaving ruins that made up their backlands. The thunderpath was covered in snow marking in several places nearby. The structures were unlit, all the twoleg lights broken. With nothing but moonlight to guide them, they slowed their pace. Rye's guards widened their perimeter around her, two even walking backwards to keep a constant eye on what was behind them. Rye stopped when they caught the scent of other allies. Kritz and two other warrior-rah emerged from one of the nests. Her guards engulfed both cats, moving at a slower pace and tightening their perimeter.

"I am glad to see you safe, my Prophet," Kritz said quietly. "One of the warrior-rah briefed me on what happened at that gathering... You are scowling, my Prophet. Are you in pain?"

Rye's paws shook under the snow; she found a short wall of red-stone running along the thunderpath and leapt on it, shaking the cold sting from her claws. "That heartless wolf of a leader would punish a medicine cat in such a way!"

"It is a deplorable thing, my Prophet." Kritz scratched at his gray muzzle. "No matter her actions or reputation, I thank StarClan nothing happened to that poor she-cat tonight."

"But something did happen," Rye whispered. "It already had. And more again tonight. She is being driven away from everything she was trying to protect."

"My Prophet?"

"Remind me again how much longer it will take reinforcements to arrive."

Kritz dipped his head. "My Prophet, two warrior-rah from the branch in *glasow* arrived while you were away. But they warn twoleg infrastructure is still in shambles and travel is difficult. We will no longer hold our enclave in two nights. I fear none may arrive in time for us to surmount the Shadow's ultimatum."

"We have no time to wait, then. The numbers we have now will have to do." Rye leapt from the red-stone wall and towards the front

of the pack.

Kritz caught up. "Do you have another idea, my Prophet?"

The warrior-rah held their formation around the two. Some swiveled their ears inward out of curiosity. Rye glanced up at the sliver of moon still shining brightly amidst the thickening whisps of clouds. She looked back at the old tom and nodded.

"You trading our territory for my freedom is a commendable action. You are a loyal herald, and I will never be angry at you for assuming anything of me. But our work with the Clan of False Shadows does not end with my power. Otherwise, I would no longer be among you. With UnderClan losing their medicine cats, this war can still end in the Shadow's favor."

"All their medicine cats!?" Kritz's ears shot up. "What happened to them?"

"There were two," Rye said, her ears folding back. "It is part of the reason why they were punishing Blackleaf. I will explain everything that has happened in the last moon when we return to our territory. But my time in UnderClan was not wasted, even if it did not serve its initial purpose. I have connections with their leader. Clementstar will accept our aid. I am certain of it."

"If we are to make the journey to UnderClan, then time is an important factor," Kritz said. "Without the bridge, we must leave the whole peninsula and travel to them the long way. Entering the side with the twoleg's war memorial will let us slip into UnderClan territory without the Shadows knowing. It will take a night, minimum, travelling in small enough groups to ensure we do not draw the twolegs' attention. I pray they have abandoned more territory than we know of."

I do not care what Blackleaf thinks of me, Rye thought. *And it matters little where she is. I promised myself I would save her. If this region is to thrive after StarClan's will has been realized, cats like her must survive.*

She glanced around at the warrior-rah guarding her. Some had broken off further ahead and behind her, their fur dotted with

snow. Two stood close in front of her, pressing into the snow-covered thunderpath while those in the back scrubbed all of their pawprints. Rye glanced at Kritz; his ears were low but his head was high, squinting his eyes around their surroundings. Then she glanced between the warrior-rah, each and every one of them. She lingered when she spotted features that stood out to her: one blind in an eye, another with a clipped ear, a third with a bald patch on his leg. She dawdled on a she-cat with blue eyes and tan fur. The fact that her muzzle was slightly larger than her own. And that she walked with slight limp that took much of her focus to hide, struggling to glance at her surroundings. Rye stopped when she found herself looking longer. The rest of the group stopped with her, eventually staring at both of them.

"Warrior-rah, what is your name?" Rye asked the blue-eyed she-cat.

"Hover, my Prophet," she replied.

"Are you injured, Hover?"

"A... disfigurement, my Prophet. Nothing that prevents me from serving you."

Rye glanced at the large scars that wrapped all the way around her paw. No fur had grown back to cover any of them. The warrior-rah fanned out around the three cats, again covering a larger perimeter.

"Is there... anything more you need from me, my Prophet?" Hover mewed.

Rye shook her head. "I feel like I am meeting you for the first time."

"Actually, it is the first time I have been addressed by the Incarnate. Your acknowledgement honors and lifts my spirit, my Prophet. No matter where we are."

Rye nodded; Hover returned to her watch as the group moved again. Her limp seemed to be easier to manage, and she appeared calmer than before. The she-kit looked up. The last of the half-moon was blurred by the thin clouds. But Rye kept her tail up, closing her eyes and muttering a prayer before speeding up her pace.

Chapter 43

The chamber was still clear of snow. All of the green on the ground had frozen over and died, leaving holes where plants once pushed through the broken floor. The long-destroyed sky-monster, still part buried in the ground and lying straight up in the center of the den, still glistened in what was left of the moonlight shining through thin clouds. The two cats were sitting in front of it. One, a brown vest with a bag on each side draped over her back, kept her head down and mumbled to herself. Her gray fur was dotted with snow, the white spots in her pelt even showing it. Her tail twitched nervously in her silence, attracting the attention of the other. The large wildcat's white fur was brown from dust, but she kept her clawless paws clean. Her remaining good blue eye traveled between her companion's tail and the 'X' marking on the side of her companion's vest bags. The tapping of several cats echoed from the nearby twoleg structures after kicking loose objects. But the crunching of snow just outside perked both their ears up. The wildcat scratched her mangled nose. The white she-cat nervously poked her head inside, the deep blue in her eyes clashing with the brown and gray façade of the twoleg den.

"Fleetheart, Flyfoot, are you here?" she said.

"Angelika?" Fleetheart said, lifting her head.

Angelika walked through the small crack in the den that made up the entrance in full, revealing the weak one on her back.

"Blackleaf..." Flyfoot's ears dropped.

The warrior nervously glanced between the pair and Blackleaf. She walked towards the center of the room, resting the young cat against the destroyed sky-monster. Fleetheart made room for her, backing from her spot and standing. Her eyes widened when she saw the blood. What was coming from the claw marks on her scruff had already been licked away. But her face and paws were still covered in it. Blackleaf's blood-stained tail immediately curled

between her legs when she saw Fleetheart's nose twitch and Flyfoot turn away. Her eyes were barely open, and she only made shallow breaths.

"I'll, um, go now," Angelika mewed.

"Stay. Please." Fleetheart motioned her to sit. She did so, keeping herself closer to a corner than to her friend. "Blackleaf? Are you okay?" She gently rested a paw on the young cat's shoulder. She made no reaction.

"Us and her kin kept from meeting," Flyfoot mumbled. "Leaftail and Christa patrols kept routes. Medicine cats ordered here. We only told Blackleaf rescued alive. We not know what happen next. Why she covered in blood? It under cat blood?"

The young medicine cat shook her head, whimpering and curling her tail towards her nose. The other three were still and silent. The air inside the den cooled again as a fresh breeze gently shifted the loose snowflakes on the ground. The glisten in the sky-monster vanished as the thin clouds finally dulled the late moonlight.

"Blackleaf, we need to know." Flyfoot practically growled as she walked towards the young cat.

"Flyfoot, please—"

Fleetheart was silenced by the wildcat's cropped tail brushing against her muzzle. The glare she made quickly faded when she saw Blackleaf lift her head to face her former mentor looming over her. Her comrades looked anxiously at the pair.

"Solestar join raid into UnderClan, like she say she would?"

Blackleaf nodded.

"She take the Rye kit, too?"

She nodded again.

"She rescue Molenose?"

Blackleaf paused for a moment, shaking her head. The wildcat sighed, forcing aggression in her composure when she began to relax.

"You tell UnderClan anything while you there?"

Angelika shook her head. "She'd never—"

"Better Solestar hear what she want from me than get hold of her again. You say anything, Blackleaf?"

When Flyfoot bent her head down to lean closer, Blackleaf fixed on the bite marks on her back. Even through her thick fur, she still noticed them when it gently parted in the small gusts of wind and subtle movements she made. They were marked further by a few thinned spots on her upper back. A large paw pushed the young cat's head down.

"You say anything, Blackleaf?"

"No!" she snapped, before calming again.

"What happen after you return to camp?"

Blackleaf tensed up. She looked away from the wildcat and curled her tail even tighter around her body. She shivered a bit and nipped at it a few times whenever it twitched towards her face. The sky seemed to get a bit darker, the clouds high above quickly thickening and blocking more moonlight. Blackleaf's tail lifted towards her mouth. She was fixed on the blood at the tip, her eyes staying dull. Her rear paws started to twitch, threatening to jump up.

"Blackleaf?" Flyfoot said.

"Solestar killed him... He's dead because of me."

"Who?"

"I'm so sorry, Flyfoot. Please don't leave me, too. Please!"

Before Blackleaf could crumble back into herself, Flyfoot forced her

upright and wrapped herself around her. The young medicine cat pressed her body into the wildcat's chest, folding her ears in and letting her muscles relax in the embrace. Her paws gave out from under her, and the two laid down with Blackleaf still pressed into Flyfoot's long fur.

"Angelika, what happened at that meeting?" Fleetheart said. "Who did Solestar kill?"

The white she-cat's eyes dropped. "Solestar wouldn't execute her, and the clan wouldn't accept it. So she ordered Blackleaf to be mated with in front of the whole clan. She called Wolfgang to do it. When he refused, they got into an argument about his former mate. She killed him right there when he attacked."

"No... How did she even know about Shortfang?" Fleetheart's ears pressed against her head, and her paws dug through the dirt.

"After Wolfgang was killed, she dispersed us and told me to take Blackleaf out of her sight... She got a lot of mean looks as we were coming here. I don't think she's safe back in camp."

"Of course she isn't. A mating in front of half the clan? Of a medicine cat. From someone she knew well just to make it cruel. Why does Solestar have to be so merciless?" Fleetheart, feeling the fur on the back of her neck spike, took a deep breath and settled. "We will speak to Solestar. And I must say goodbye to my dear friend. He will be with StarClan soon enough. He certainly deserves it."

"Is it safe to leave her here?"

Angelika glanced at Blackleaf, still deep in Flyfoot's embrace.

"They'll be fine," Fleetheart whispered. "They need their space."

Angelika, glancing at them again, nodded and followed the older medicine cat through the crack in the wall she came in. Blackleaf and Flyfoot were alone. The den seemed a bit colder. Loose snow from the roof began falling through the holes in the ceiling. But the two stayed in their embrace, the young medicine cat finally

calming. The wildcat began to purr, saying nothing about the blood on the young cat's fur rubbing into her own. Even as the wind creaked some of the wood on the outside and the yelps from distant warriors echoed, they only focused on each other.

"Kin..." Blackleaf mumbled.

"What?" Flyfoot whispered.

"I called her kin. And she called me a mess."

Chapter 44

Not one whiff of rotting wood, scent markings, or carrion drifted in the breeze. The gray sky loomed low and showed no weaknesses. New-fallen snow covered whatever signs of life were left in the area. No matter what, she could not take her mind from the hisses and scratches running through it. Even when she was certain nothing was around her did she stop hearing them, not even for a heartbeat. Not until she focused and forced the sounds away would they stop. She took another breath; nothing again. The air was just as stale as it was moments prior. Her legs sunk into the white with every step forward, fighting its depth every time. Gentle snowfall covered her body, but she did not seek the shelter of the nearby twoleg nests. She just looked around again and took a deep breath. The sounds did not resurge. So, she just kept moving forward. The twoleg nests in the area were not in disarray or like she was used to. They were old and filled with holes, bits of their crumbling walls still surrounded their foundations, but they stood tall and safe. She looked at each and every one. They were all arranged in neat rows, each nest the same height, color, shape, and size. She walked between them all, where a tar-stone thunderpath would be if not for the snow. Nearby were the remains of a massive twoleg monster. It had long, continuous treads on each side surrounding groups of wheels which would have rolled it around. The top was squared off with ridges and holes adorning it. In the front was a massive thunderstick. It was tilted towards the ground. The hatch on the top was open. For a heartbeat, she thought she caught the scent of another cat. It faded away quickly in the breeze.

It looks so much different now, she thought. *Fleetheart told me about them. She said these tigers would spit fire, and could crush a normal monster right underneath them. I didn't believe her. She said 'Blackleaf, imagine one of those causing a small earthquake just because it rolled by'... she was almost excited to describe tigers. I guess she convinced her comrades from hamburg that they were there to defend them from the sky-monsters. Somehow...*

She shook her matting fur lightly, almost cautious that too much snow would fall from her back. Each time she lifted her cold paws, they showed tinges of red. She glanced at them occasionally. The weight in her chest returned, briefly, each time she did. Her claws were retracted, but she occasionally drew them through the snow. She kept her head low and let her tail drag carelessly behind her. When the snow on her back strained her slightly, she shook lightly and trudged on. She glanced into the distance. One of the poles with an inactive twoleg light on top was bent over; a cat ran down it and disappeared behind a neighboring structure. It had a bird in its mouth. She skipped a steady beat from her monotony, but continued on as normal. She could feel the eyes still staring at her, though. She felt as though she was being watched by the mystery hunter, uncertain if the strange clan cat who wandered on into its home would strike or not. Blackleaf stopped and looked into the twoleg structure it disappeared into. A large hole showed little of the vast inside. Sure enough, a pair of green eyes was staring back at her. They were wide, unmoving, almost surprised. She looked down at her paws again.

I should be practically invisible to them. But I wonder if his blood still carries a scent... I still smell it.

The mystery cat did not look away. Blackleaf continued; the large twoleg structure was in her path. Just like the others, it towered over anything from her former home and was in much better shape. Even more so than the identical ones around it. And, unlike the others, it sat in the middle of the thunderpath. Instead of small entrances for twolegs on the front, it had one massive entrance that nearly took up the whole wall. It could easily allow several twoleg monsters side-by-side through, but it was tightly shut. In front of it lay another still tiger. Just like the last it was lost to the war, thunderstick pointed down and top hatch open. It had a strange scent, unlike most twoleg silverwood objects. The plates surrounding its body were blackened and had no holes in them. She spotted another set of eyes in the wheels inside its treads. They were yellow and looked cautious, too. Blackleaf turned; the green eyes were still watching her. They moved to a different part of the structure, but still watched.

My com—former comrades wouldn't patrol this close. And I would've recognized their scent. These cats are covered in the black water and dust that's common in this area. This is their home. I'm an outsider to them...

She cut her thoughts and shook her head. Walking around the tiger, she stood at the base of the twoleg nest. It was even larger up close; tilting her head all the way up made it seem like a massive wall of char-scented gray. The structure had some twoleg-speak painted on it. Shaking snow from her back again, she spotted a way in. The massive doors blocking the entrance were cracked open right behind the tiger. She would easily fit though. The snow beneath her paws was no longer deep enough to conceal the red covering them. She sighed, but did not dwell. They were too cold. She turned around and sat near the entrance, letting her tail instinctively wrap around her legs.

How many is she using to watch me? Blackleaf closed her eyes. *One for each corner? No, this place is too big for that. She's probably tasked apprentices in patrol groups. And maybe some of the newest members like Angelika... I hope you're patrolling this place instead of the borders. I don't want you to die, either.*

A frigid gust blow through her fur, making the thinner parts of her coat twitch. She looked at the clouds. They moved ever so slightly, but remained solid and low. She felt snowfall build up on her back again before turning her attention to some of the cats hiding in the distance. She made sure not to look any in the eye, unphased by their constant attention.

This place reminds me of the place I would go for quiet. After I injured... mutilated my littermate. Moons later. I found a thunderstick. A really long one that faced the ground. Fleetheart said they used to face the sky and spit fireballs at sky-monsters. It was dark and quiet. No other apprentices would go, afraid twolegs would show up to reclaim it. They did, eventually. But for those first moons as a medicine apprentice, it was the best place to think. When I came back, Flyfoot would order me to wash the black powder scent away in the river. No one wanted to be near me then, either... I probably would've frozen if I had to do that now. Good thing I only did that in Greenleaf, I guess. Everything was some sort of clue. Everything could be rekindling StarClan's word. I ran

out on the medicine den's watch so many times they wondered if I would make a better hunter instead. Some apprentice I was... Things just seemed so much easier then.

Blackleaf spotted dozens of eyes watching her. She focused on one. She could not scent her, but her eyes were a brilliant green. Her long coat was a light smoke gray with patches of brown all over them. She could not see any scratches or marks from the distance, but she had left her meal behind to watch. She stood atop the thick snow without sinking in, keeping perfect balance. The mystery hunter's tail was straight with her back, ready to dart away or charge at the first sign of movement. And she was perfectly still. Blackleaf walked through the crack in the massive entrance and immediately spotted several figures moving to hide amidst the many piles of stuff. Sheets and pipes of shining silverwood, a massive coil of pointy silverthorn, and large cylinders of all types of materials occupied most of the space. The whole nest was one giant den with a smaller nest hanging from the corner of the ceiling, a simple network of platformsto access it. There were several tigers abandoned in the middle of the den. Some were mint and covered in glistening silverthorn. Others had massive holes covered by planks of wood.

Blackleaf shuttered, eyes low as she walked forward. *Things got even worse after my first heat. Fleetheart never liked how much control we had over repressing it. She thinks it should happen when two cats are in love with each other. And medicine cats couldn't take mates in the clans she was raised in and around, and neither could their apprentices. Taking a mate never interested me, even though I could. Even at eight moons, mating just seemed like a problem. I never wanted to be a mother... I wanted to accomplish something that would make them proud one day. And I couldn't do that if I lost time nursing new litters every few seasons. But she-cats can't suppress their first few. An apprentice tom was willing, so I just went with him and thought I'd be quick.*

Blackleaf stopped. There were forms moving around, eyes on her. More had shown, but it did not deter her from her walk.

We went to a quiet spot in the backlands to get it over with. And that's... when I saw the blood. I was told it would hurt but I didn't know it'd hurt

me more than him. The poor tom did nothing wrong. I panicked. The sight of my own blood, even briefly, just made me lose it. After it came out, I kicked with my hind legs. My claws were unsheathed... It would be moons before he mated with anyone again. It healed, but his opinion of me never changed after that. And the worst part is he blamed himself. The other apprentices teased him, saying he should've known better than to take an offer from Blackpaw 'the badger-heart'. That he'd been too tempted and lost sight of who I was... I blamed it on the weather at first. 'A she-cat should never go into heat during a stretch of cold weather'. What a terrible excuse. I took all of Fleetheart and Flyfoot's lessons for controlling heat. I think it was better their way, anyway. That was the second time I had seriously injured a cat for something so mundane. Battle training, mating for the first time, none of these things are important. None of these things put my life in danger... so why did I have to lash out so violently? Why would I do things like that to my own former comrades? Leaftail never deserved what he got, either. His warrior name is based on his mutilated tail. Both were able to move past it... physically, at least.

Blackleaf continued through the massive den. Her belly growled, but she ignored it. She passed a massive coil of silverthorn when she spotted cats scattering. They quickly scurried to the next nearest places to hide; boxes and large grooves in the floor were preferred. Everywhere she glanced big enough for one to hide in was taken. Looking behind her, the same gray and brown she-cat was still following her in full view, again. She stayed near one of the tigers just in case. Her fur was clear of snowfall, reminding Blackleaf to do the same before it started to melt. There were no large holes in the ceiling like in so many other twoleg nests. But she could hear the structure creaking in the breeze, even with how mild the breeze was. She was numb from walking around in the deep snow for so long but ignored it, moving even slower than before.

I don't like to think they hated me growing up. I didn't hate myself, then. Blackleaf carefully stepped over broken scraps littering the floor. *It was like I was constantly surrounded. Everything was against me, and I just wanted to help in my own way. I gave myself that goal of bringing the voice of StarClan back. How else was I supposed to justify my actions, and fears, and the self-isolation? I convinced myself hurting Leaftail and that tom were because I could not die. That StarClan gave*

me the same scentless condition as Littlestar and a fear of my own blood. Every time I see it, I feel like I just have to watch, powerless to stop it. Little by little. Like a wounded animal after losing a fight. I always told myself it was the end, even when it wasn't. I never tried to change it. No one who knew made me try, either—no. This is my *problem.*

They got closer, the hidden cats. There were dozens more, some hiding and some standing in plain view. All were cautious, except for the mystery hunter she spotted first. Her tail was straight up and her legs were no longer crouched. When Blackleaf cleared the sharp bits on the floor, her ears perked up. A reflection on a far wall caught her eye, beyond the tiger she passed by prior. Too far for her to see, she approached it.

They never got to know me. I always let them think what I was doing was too important for sharing tongues and group patrols. I was always by myself. Even Leaftail avoided me when we were both in training. But just before his warrior ceremony, he told me several apprentices had died in battle by UnderClan incursions into our backlands. He was changing, growing to hate the other side of the river. He even advised Solestar to block any entrances to the underground tunnels, even in Star Covenant territory. I don't think he expected to keep vigil for any of his comrades before becoming a warrior. I... I said nothing to him. Just they were hunting with StarClan. He never believed me. I never thought for a heartbeat he believed me. I should've said more. They were my comrades, too. And I was a medicine cat in training. I should've cared more.

Even more revealed themselves. Some were hiding on the walkways far overhead. Many rested on the stairs leading to the overhead platforms. Others were just on their paws and keeping pace. They always kept a tree-length distance between themselves and her. Blackleaf took a deep breath and approached the mirror, now in clear view.

I never even got to know myself, thinking about it. And by the time I learned, it was too late.

She turned around when the mystery hunter approached closer than all the others. Blackleaf was in full view of the mirror. But her

claws failed to show at the boldness of the other cat. She was only briefly concerned before staring back at her own reflection.

"This isn't something that's supposed to happen," she said. "It was supposed to be simple. Bring back StarClan. Make the clan proud and happy. Live up to what was expected of me. But there's no answers. Littlestar found nothing. Fleetheart found nothing. Where am I supposed to look?"

The gray mystery hunter still kept her distance and was barely visible in the dirty mirror. Blackleaf's heart sank as she studied herself. She lingered on every patch of missing fur from her back and the back of her neck. Her tail looked perpetually wet, its fur covered in dirt and mud the snow did not brush away. Her hind legs were locked straight, making her appear hurt. Her lush leafbare coat was thinning in several places. The left side of her face was missing whiskers, no longer matching the density of those on the right. Thinner parts of her fur showed many tiny scratches. Her nose and mouth were more red than normal from the furless scratches, the pink in them dulled by dozens of narrow scars. Blood still covered the rest. It was still lightly colored red. As was her chest and front legs. She only focused on that after a while. It stuck out against her white coat, overpowering her pink eyes. Exhaustion crept into her vision. She refused to focus on anything else after a while, forcing herself, even, to look into her tired eyes. On the inside they were red, and underneath they were brown. They were low. They had scratches on the brows. And they made her growl. They made her hiss; she smacked the mirror. It banged against the wall it was propped up on. Several of the cats behind her hid, but still watched. Her breathing quickened. Her heart raced.

"Why is it so hard to find you?" She raised her voice. "Why can't I find anything? What does StarClan possibly want to hide from cats by not showing themselves. Clans are in chaos, at war, and you won't show. What did we do!?" She smacked the mirror again, shouting. "We need your guidance. Cats are losing faith, and hope, and killing each other. I just want to give you back to them. I want to say I'm sorry and have it mean something! Everything I've done in life has led to this. To *nothing*! Solestar told me I was better. She wanted me to succeed more than anyone. But fifteen moons later,

she's pinning me down and forcing a tom to mate with me in front of everyone. Is that not enough!? Do things have to get worse for you to answer me!? Everything was supposed to lead to it. And now I won't even have my own body. Condemned on my return to give birth to new kits with nothing to look forward to but ridicule and shame of their origin. And Wolfgang... Wolfgang, why. Why didn't you just do it? I would've rather accepted a lifetime of humiliation than watch you die. Solestar is right. I killed him... me, not StarClan. All of this is my fault!"

The gray she-cat was still firm, unphased by Blackleaf hitting the mirror. But when the younger cat approached, she backed away, her tired, pink eyes frantic and her breathing shallow.

"Only three of them ever looked past my mistakes. Wolfgang is dead. I might never see Flyfoot again. And Solestar pinned me down to be violated in front of the whole clan! She called me a mess. She said I was better as an apprentice. And you know what? She was right!"

Blackleaf locked eyes with the gray she-cat, stopping.

"What are you looking at?" she growled.

The she-cat did not respond.

"*What are you looking at!?*"

She did not recoil at Blackleaf's hiss.

"Is it the blood? Does it *scare* you? Well, it's the blood of my clan. And its my own. And I'm not even scared of it anymore, because I can't tell whose is who. I don't care who you are and what you want. Just *tell me* what you're looking at!?"

Blackleaf collapsed into her own blood-stained paws and buried her head in them, covering her eyes and flattening her ears. She left her hind legs splayed out behind her, along with her tail.

"Where did I go so wrong with this?" she whispered.

The gray she-cat took a few steps closer, her long tail curled around

one of her legs. She was also breathing quick, her paws even shaking a little. But did not stop her from taking another step towards the white cat laying a fox-length from her. The others left their hiding spots and returned to watching in the open.

"I just want this stuff off me," Blackleaf mumbled. "I can't look at it anymore."

Chapter 45

Her fur was cleaner. When she noticed a spot she missed, she licked at it vigorously until the blood stopped coming off, leaving what was left stained below the surface. It was almost gone from her paws, but its red tint was still visible against her white coat. She shivered whenever she had to shift positions. She rested on the narrow platforms close to the ceiling. The bare silverwood was wide enough for a single twoleg to pass at a time. The grid was still connected, not one part broken off, and led to careful networks of stairs and entrances at all different heights. The small, evenly-spaced holes cut out from the bottom kept her from warming comfortably, a light draft flowing underneath. She was just close enough to the small yellow nest hanging in the top corner to block some of the wind coming from gashes in the walls. Occasionally, she would look down through the holes at the ground a tall tree-length beneath her. She could barely see it through the tiny holes in the ceiling, but the sky was clear and the light of the moon shined through. Dozens of small beams of light let her see the area around her, and reflected from the few pure-white spots on her fur. The tolerable peace was broken by her belly growling throughout her body. She could feel it through her skin and deep to her bones. She rested her head on the platform and sighed. Strays from all around gathered on lower platforms, stairs, hanging bars of silverwood, and any other surface they could occupy. Some even found their way into the small twoleg nest hanging behind her, staring through the unbroken clear-stone. She knew they were all staring at her. Her tail curled around her legs, but she never tried to hide herself. She kept an eye on all of them with a glance at her surroundings every once in a while. None ever got closer than they were. Except when her ears perked up at the tapping of paws up the creaky stairs to her platform. Her claws shot out, and she lifted her head. The approaching mystery hunter stepped into the dotted moonlight. Her lush, gray fur had large brown patches dotting much of it. She walked without her claws, easily tolerating the subtle movements the hanging platforms made. The she-cat was much larger than her, but no bigger than others. Her green eyes brilliantly accented her

slender face and long neck. Her fur was even and well groomed. No one else was with her, but a rat was tossed from behind her and landed right at Blackleaf's paws. She instinctively sniffed it. The kill was clean of dust and dirt, no fang marks around its neck. It even twitched a bit. She moved her muzzle away from it and looked over the edge of the platform.

"A fall from this height might kill a careless cat," Blackleaf mumbled.

The gray she-cat said nothing.

"You look exactly like the others described... Are you Littlestar?"

She still said nothing.

"Did StarClan send you to mock me?"

The mystery hunter motioned towards the rat, laying down and keeping her head up. Blackleaf could feel her belly twist into knots when it growled again.

"Why don't you answer me?"

The she-cat groomed her paws.

"Is it personal to you the kin of your littermate couldn't bring StarClan back? You can't even stand to speak to me, can you?"

Blackleaf tried to sum up the desire to bare her fangs and growl. Nothing came of it, but her fangs were still out as her eyes slowly rolled downward to the rat. Just looking at it stopped the pain in her belly; She chomped down on the rat's back and tore away a large chunk of its flesh. The mystery hunter nodded as the young cat devoured the fresh-kill. Blackleaf paid no attention at first, working her way through the rat's gut and eating everything it had to offer. Only when she was down to the flesh on the tiny bones did she stop to take breaths. She finally lifted her head and stared at the other she-cat, her ears slowly flattening.

"There's something about you that looks familiar." The she-cat's voice was deep, almost melodic. "Then you said Littlestar, and I

have to know more."

Blackleaf pushed the carcass aside. "Are you Littlestar? Are you from StarClan?"

The she-cat tapped her paw. "I'm her littermate. Name's Reiz."

The medicine cat's ears perked slightly. "I only know of Christa."

"You have no scent." Reiz slid closer. "You must be Christa's kit. And Christa must be my other surviving littermate. If Littlestar had any kits, I'm sure the story of the Axin Mess would've mentioned it."

"Christa said her kin died with Littlestar."

"That makes sense. I grew up a rogue under a cat named Howard, then Burn. He's with UnderClan. You would've never known about those he knew in *hamburg* before he joined Littlestar."

"You don't look like an Axin Mess survivor."

"Well, that's a story..."

Reiz trailed off when the young cat started looking around the other balconies and platforms. Many pairs of eyes were staring at her through the dark. Any ears she saw were perked, tails swinging or laying or hanging about. Even more gathered to listen to the two speak. None looked ready to run as before.

"Are they scared of me?" Blackleaf said.

Reiz shook her head. "They're skittish, but not scared of clan cats. All are of this twolegplace, with stories of owners unable to feed them or war dogs sent around to kill them. The twolegs beyond the river area are always hungry and poison the vermin. So it all ends up here. Vermin, kittypets, and loaners alike. Sometimes, we're approached by your clan for recruits. Speaking of, how's Angelika doing? She wasn't here long."

"She's fine." Blackleaf looked away.

Reiz tapped her paws for a moment before opening her mouth.

"How are you?"

Blackleaf glared at the older she-cat.

"You mentioned some... pretty heavy things earlier today."

"What does it matter to you?" Blackleaf's eyes looked to nothing in the distance.

"I thought, well, you would want someone to talk to about it. I never... assumed clans had such heinous punishments and I'm sorry —"

"They didn't *do* anything to me," Blackleaf hissed. "And don't apologize. You had nothing to do with it. I'm not one of these wayward loaners you're used to being around. Don't you dare treat me like one."

Reiz waved her paw. "No, of course not. We just met, after all. It's just... you seemed so hurt. You reminded me off some things."

"Why shouldn't I be angry?" Blackleaf growled. "I deserved everything I did get. Solestar was right about me. I've caused more problems for the clan than I solved."

"I don't think any cat would deserve to be violated like that."

"You don't even know what I've done."

Reiz reached her paw out. "Earlier, you said—"

"Don't touch me!"

Blackleaf slashed at the paw; Reiz yanked it back. She even slid away a little, forcing herself to calm down. "Earlier... you said you wanted to find out why StarClan left. It seems like your life's goal."

The young cat narrowed her eyes. "What is this?"

"I just want to talk to you."

"I told you, you have nothing to do with this."

"I don't like seeing others in pain."

Blackleaf looked away.

"You have something to say. I know you do... Blackleaf, I'm not your clanmate, or your friend. But I am your kin, technically. We don't know each other. Just imprint whoever you want on me. I look just like Littlestar, but larger."

"You have something to say, too, don't you?"

Reiz opened her mouth, but glanced away from the young cat.

"Did you come looking for advice?"

The older cat's ears drooped.

Blackleaf sighed, looking at her. "It's fine. At least you were truthful."

"I don't know you," Reiz said, "but the albino medicine cat mentioned many times by Shadow patrols is a pretty easy description to remember. And clan medicine cats are supposedly wise beyond their years. I-I swear, I want to hear you out first. But I figured... if both of us have problems, we can help each other."

Blackleaf's eyes narrowed.

"I shouldn't have made this about me." Reiz stepped away. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Blackleaf whispered. "I don't want to sleep, right now. All I can think about is last night. I'm better at helping strangers than my own comrades, anyway."

The older she-cat look relieved, taking a few steps closer but careful to keep a fox-length away from the other. Blackleaf looked down at her paws. The red tinge in them still showed through the blue-tinted moonlight beaming through the holes in the ceiling. She shook her head, keeping her mouth shut and waiting for Reiz to say something. She only dared to lean her long neck a bit closer, not making a sound. The others surrounding them seemed to get

comfortable. And they took her attention. She glanced over all the eyes she could see. The muzzles on none of them moved. She quickly cycled through them again. And again. Until she stared blankly at the platform beneath her. Blackleaf hardly noticed her chest puffing up and down; she calmed herself. But Reiz noticed.

"If it's hard for you—"

"I don't want to fail again," Blackleaf growled. The fur on the back of her neck calmly fell as she shook the anger from her face. "I... You said you had something to say. Go. Please."

Reiz's ears perked back up when she saw Blackleaf staring intently at her. "You... really don't want to say yours?"

"I didn't come here looking for rehabilitation," Blackleaf said. "Just say something first."

"Surely, you know the whole story of the Axin Mess?"

"Everyone in this region knows it. Even the birds."

"Well, the part about being Littlestar's littermate is true, too. When our mother was caring for us, she was especially cruel to her, being a scentless runt and all. Before she was killed, StoneClan's leader took her away from us. It left me and my other three littermates. Our mother abandoned us shortly after Littlestar was taken, so a twoleg took us all in. One stayed. Me and the other left and went our separate ways when we were ten moons. I joined a small band of rogues for protection. Wouldn't see the one who stayed again until here, as a member of the Clan of False Shadows and with her new name. I knew nothing of her life as a kittypet, or as a AchseClan warrior. Or what happened to my other littermates."

"Did you ever see Littlestar again?" Blackleaf said.

Reiz hung herself lower. "Yeah. Longstar visited Howard at one point before he died. A warrior who looked just like me was with him. I knew it was her. She didn't know who I was, though. I didn't think much of seeing her. I thought I'd introduce myself next time. But I had no idea the Great Sky War was about to get worse.

Howard died in a sky-monster attack. Our adopted home inside a twoleg nest was destroyed. And Burn, disfigured from an earlier attack, took over as leader. The clan of wildcats, LeafClan, grew far more aggressive, killing rogues and attacking kittypets. We laid low, staying out of their and StoneClan's way. When StoneClan formed a plan to swell their ranks by protecting kittypets from the wildcats, a massive sky-monster attack happened. The sky turned red. The wind fires created was strong enough to tear structures apart. I could only hear sirens and thundersticks and screaming. So many dead. Clan cats, kittypets, rogues, twolegs, everything. Our home was destroyed, again. When it was all done and over, we knew things were only going to get harder. It broke me. I felt like I had nothing, again. Not even my own sanity. It didn't matter who I was around. Burn clung to me. We got really close, actually. But I couldn't listen to another siren, or watch another cat burn to death. I wasn't strong enough."

"You fled, then." Blackleaf looked away, ears dropping.

She nodded. "One time, I spent an afternoon wishing a sky-monster would take me. Would I die today, or tomorrow? The constant uncertainty was tearing me apart. I knew it was time to leave... A group of us went looking for food and a new source of fresh water. We split up. I decided to check the river. Well, not only had the twoleg-made banks collapsed, but the river was sludge. Blackened, smelly, filled with thin-tar. But someone tried to drink from it, anyway. I cleaned her up a little and realized it was my dying littermate, the one who also left the life of a kittypet behind. She was so out of it, she didn't even recognize me. I had a hard time recognizing her, too. She was already balding, and lying in a pool of her drying blood. But if I could recognize her as my littermate, my patrol group could mistake her for me. I moved her close to where I was searching. Thought they'd believe I fell in and clawed my way out just to die on the bank. As far as I was concerned, I died with her. They must've bought it if Christa believes she's the last of our litter... Anyway, I hopped on the next snake-monster out and had a peaceful ride to this twolegplace. All I could think about was how they'd react if they ever found out I deserted. I was still miserable. And, once I got here, I wandered for a long time. I had nightmares that Burn would find me and kill me in my sleep, or that any water

I drank was somehow poison. Then the sky-monsters started hitting this place just like *hamburg*. I was willing to throw away everything I had to flee that terror, and it was all in vain. More sirens, more screaming, and blood. For longer, too. But I survived, alone. I regretted what I'd done. If I was going to face the Great Sky War anyway, I could've at least helped Burn by staying in *hamburg*. When I learned he and others survived, I just couldn't face them. So I found this place and started helping any stray and loaner to wander in. Survivors of the Axin Mess have burns, nightmares, and no claws, rotted away from exposure to that toxic sky. I wish mine would, too. To atone for my failure—"

She clamped her mouth shut, even holding a paw to it. Blackleaf's ears perked up and the fur on the back of her neck spiked. Her claws began tapping at the platform. Each creak echoed above the wind and throughout the nest. Reiz slid a bit closer to the younger cat. When she was close enough, she reached out her paw and gently rested it on Blackleaf's. The bright in her green eyes was much duller as her eyelids dropped, the moonlight refusing to reflect from them. Her fur was calmer. She bent her neck, ruining her perfect posture, down to the smaller cat's height. But Blackleaf felt herself calming, too.

"Seems like you've been waiting to get that out," Blackleaf whispered, retracting her claws.

"I shouldn't have said anything about wishing for harm," Reiz said.

"Why? Because of what I said earlier?"

"Well... yes. I want to forgive myself. And I don't want to remind you of—"

"There's no forgetting last night. I don't want to, anyway."

"But you should. If you don't, it means you're just like me. You're still hurt."

"It makes me nothing like you." Blackleaf narrowed her eyes, energy returning to her posture. "Your life was in *genuine* danger from something out of your control. I looked down on my comrades

growing up. I actively plotted with my own interests in mind. I even aided an enemy medicine cat by freeing her from captivity. What if she ran away from me? What if those sent to get her actually did?"

"So that's what that was," Reiz said. "It looked more like a final request than an attempted release. She was all skin and bones."

"It doesn't matter what my intentions were. All that matters is how they interpreted it. Then there was deserting the clan. I left the last of myself as a medicine cat in UnderClan. *That* was the moment I became useless. *That* moment! Because it's the point where I gave up on myself. And, at the end of it all, it got someone I admire killed... Wolfgang was precious to me, even if he didn't return the feelings. Why didn't he just do it? Why did he have to resist? My dignity wasn't worth his life!"

Blackleaf started shaking; Reiz rubbed her paw.

"They didn't care! They didn't need StarClan. They feared Rye, UnderClan, twoleg monsters. They needed a sage and a healer, not an interpreter. I failed them... and I believe I must accept punishment for that. I truly believe that."

"No one deserves a punishment like that," Reiz growled. "Force mating is a gutless punishment."

"It doesn't matter what you think of it," Blackleaf hissed. "I deserved it. I can't think of a reason why, anymore. The only ones who are still with me can't protect me forever. I mean, look at me! His blood still stains my paws. I can't just walk away with it and pretend like nothing's wrong!"

"Blackleaf—"

"I can't just apologize. I must atone... I can't let this go. I don't want to."

A cool draft blew across the platforms. Some of the spotted moonlight from the holes in the ceiling faded, passing cloud whisps dulling it. A few of the cats sitting in earshot were shaken up, the pair on the platform attracting the whole twoleg nest of occupants.

Even more managed to cram themselves together. A gaze from Blackleaf shrieked some of them away, though, even when she was far out of reach. Reiz felt Blackleaf's claws extend under her own paws, her shaking finally stopping. The fur on the back of her neck was still spiked, though.

"That... wasn't what I was ready to hear," Reiz said.

"You wanted to hear what I had to say. You don't have to like it," Blackleaf said.

The older cat's ears dropped. "I've only fired up regrets from both of us."

Blackleaf pulled her paw away from Reiz's.

"I think you're right, though. I don't want to run away from Burn forever. I'll never forgive myself if he dies before I can make up for abandoning him. It'll he hard, but he's worth it... But seeing you reminded me of myself. You don't deserve to be consumed by regret, or return to a clan to have unspeakable things done to you. You deserve a chance at a safe recovery, too."

The young cat narrowed her eyes.

"The patrol of Shadows surrounding this group of twoleg nests doubled since your arrival. But they don't know every possible exit. There's one small pipe leading to an underground tunnel to the other side of the river. If these patrols are mainly younger cats, we can crawl through—"

Blackleaf slapped the older cat across the face. She felt her claws barely skim the surface of her unblemished skin. Some of the other cats whimpered or hissed. Reiz leapt back, the young cat's fur bristling. Her heavy breathing and extended claws were enough to break Reiz's composure again. A few even leapt onto the platform the pair was on, but kept their distance. Those that did dropped their stance but showed no anger, ready to tackle instead of pounce. When Blackleaf's fur flared out, the blood staining deeper strands showed in full. Even parts of her skin were tinted red. The dust and dirt along her back and sides clashed with her natural white. Her

nose flared pink and her eyes narrowed. Reiz backed away more, but slowly regained her posture. She touched a paw pad to her face and sniffed it; Blackleaf could not scent any blood, either. It made her clam a little, the fur on the back of her neck flattening. She slid herself from her crouched aggression and sat.

"I'm sorry," Blackleaf whispered.

"No, I was being selfish..." Reiz said. "But I can't just stand by and watch."

"We both made our choices. I don't want... never mind."

The two she-cats looked at each other for a while, ignoring the others. Some of the spectators began to disperse; the ones who leapt to their platform left first. Blackleaf opened her mouth to say something, perking Reiz's ears. But nothing came out. Hers folded down and she shut her eyes tight. Her muscles were still tense. She took several deep breaths, exhaustion creeping over her with each one. Her heart was thumping through her chest, defying the rest of her body. She sniffed her paw; no traces of Reiz were left behind. She could not catch a scent at all. When Blackleaf opened her eyes, the gray she-cat was gone. A bright beam of moonlight took her place.

Chapter 46

The heat was eating her alive. It consumed everything around her, choking her without a word. Ash blew into her eyes and fowled her nose. It stung. But she could not stop walking. Her legs disobeyed her when she tried to stop. The twoleg nests around her were bathed in fire. The sky was awash in blood red, hiding any hints of the night sky. Squealing in the distance were the loud, rhythmic cries of the twoleg warning sirens. In front of a structure lay the strange shape of a tiger. She could hardly see it through the ash. The massive treaded wheels rolled slowly forward, towards her. The thunderstick on top swiveled directly to the side of its square body. She jumped out of its way as it shook the ground beneath her burning paws. The thunderstick snapped; she heard nothing but ringing and never saw it coming. She staggered away from it, resisting the urge to pass out. The smoke around her was blown away with the shot. The hot ashes pelting against her sides let up just a little. One of the twoleg nests being consumed before her ceased, showing its charred entrance. The tiger rolled out of view. The fires closed in around her, never letting her up from the painful fever.

In front of the twoleg nest stood the dark shadow of a cat. its paws were bleeding from where its claws should have been. Its nipped tail wrapped around them, trying to hide the damage. It motioned her forward with a bony paw, sun-bright blue eyes piercing through the dirty air. Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed two familiar satchels at its sides, each marked with the 'X'-shaped twoleg symbol. The vest clenched the cat's narrow stomach tight, seemingly pushing tighter with each passing moment. She looked away when she heard one of its fragile ribs snap against the pressure of the vest. It lurched over and clenched its fangs, several rotted black. She cried out to it; the cat did not respond. She reached out her paw; her white fur was coated gray and the long strands once stained red were matted with clumps of soot. Distracted by it for a heartbeat, the shadowed cat blew away into the thick.

She struggled to take another step forward, keeping her paw outstretched, continuing to push against the inferno around her as it closed in just slightly. The second form to appear was massive. Its fur was fuller, but singed black and covered in ash. Some hairs were still burning, the red glows around her body threatening to ignite at any moment. But it was unphased and made no attempt to put itself out. The pink fur underneath was covered in bright-pink scratches. Red scores dotted most of its shoulders and legs and glowed through her fur. It appeared an effort to walk forward with them, so she sat. But it whined and moved its chopped tail away. It leaked blood. Pain manifested over its expression. When she called to it, she got no response. Reaching her paw out, the cat leapt up and hissed through bloody fangs. She took several steps back, the flames eating the fur on her tail when she stopped too close to the fire. Catching her breath and jumping closer to the center, the form disappeared. The fur on her own heaving chest was black with ash.

Before she could brush it away, a third shadowy form took her attention. Its healthy claws shot out and raked away the stone beneath it, sending chips flying into the fires. The third cat had deep, red eyes that never waned from hers. Even when she looked away, she knew she was being watched. It sat. She felt the pressure exerted on her paws. She felt the bones beneath being teased by it. She tried waving the pain away, but it would not stop. She could not move. The weight crept up her paws and along the back of her neck. Warmth enveloped it, but she felt no jaws. Pressure pushed down on her back, sliding towards her thighs and between her tail. She yowled, but made no sound. Every so often, the force would build and the shadow cat would close distance between them. Her paws never moved, instead floating across the ground. The eyes terrified her. Her fear pushed her to run. The fires kept her from trying. But the pressure on her body forced her to stay. It built up across her lower back. She clenched her eyes closed, but could not keep them so. They were forced open. Just as her head was forced to the ground by the heavy paw of the shadow cat. It gently brushed the ground soot away from her muzzle when it heard her choking on it.

The red eyes never went away. even when the fourth cat appeared. Its fur was bald in dozens of places, but had clean, tan fur patches

all over. There was not one spec of ash on its body. The cat was dripping blood from two round sockets; its eyes were missing, leaving black cavities in their place that oozed crimson. The creature's ears also bled. Deep cuts ran through the middle of both. It lay right next to her, staring straight at her. It even reached its neck out and sniffed her occasionally. She recoiled whenever it did. Its fur reeked of dirt. The red-eyed cat continued pinning her and exerting pressure across the top of her body. She cried out to both of them. Nothing left her mouth but bile mixed with the ash she inhaled throughout. Neither spoke. Moments later, the other two cats returned from the ash and sat nearby, forming a semi-circle around her. The red-eyed cat made sure she could turn her head enough to see each clearly, but let up no more than she needed. She wanted to shake the ash from her body. She wanted to clench her thighs together. But the weight would not allow it. It forced her to open up, and pinned her to the ground to watch.

Through the inferno around her and the ash swirling around, dozens of other eyes were staring at her. All of them white, all of them pierced through the thick at her. Most were concentrated behind the four shadowy cats. And with their presence came the hissing. They cried, jeered, shouted, and yelped. The mess of words was foreign to her. Not one coherent thought rang through her ears. But the red-eyed cat leaned in and said something that did.

A mess. And a failure.

The words stung more than the fires around her. They made her chest even heavier. She shook the feeling away and responded.

I know.

The red-eyed cat stepped aside and allowed the one with bright blue eyes to step forward. They momentarily overpowered the red, fading it in with the fires in the sky. It waved its clawless paws around, splattering her with drops of blood that burned and evaporated away.

You remind me so much of Littlescent. But you will never be her.

She desperately called out to respond, but nothing came of it.

Imprisoned in her own body, she barely managed to wipe some of the ash from her face as the massive cat with red scores all over hissed and growled into view. It loomed straight overhead and shoved the clawless one away.

This not how I train you! You not suppose end up like me!

She could not even think of words to respond to that. Her heart sank, though, her mind temporarily relieved of the painful weight crawling all over the back half of her body. The torrent around her fastened even more, the surrounding eyes closing distance. The hollow-eyed forth came forward. It stumbled around until it was convinced it was in front of her. When it looked down, its empty eye sockets drained blood all over her face. It did nothing to prevent it. She coughed and shook her head and gasped for air as it kept flowing out.

I was born with you. I thought I knew you. And all I wanted to do was listen. I would've always been there for you. But would you have been there for me? Do I even know you?

Please, stop. It's choking me—

Now I must watch my greatest fear: your suffering. I didn't care what you'd done. I only wanted my littermate to be happy. But now... it's just too late.

Two small words ran through her mind: *I know*. Over and over. It started as a whisper. Then it grew louder. It drowned out the roar of the inferno in the background. The wailing sirens ceased their warning. The eyes were still hissing and shouting from inside the fire. But those two words slowly overpowered them. She wanted to cover her ears. Shout something. Reach out and touch any of the four in front of her. But she could do nothing. Her body disobeyed her every command. Until she felt a paw on her neck. It jammed its claws into the back of it and forced her up. It lifted her off her front paws and forced her to hold her weight on her rear ones. The foreleg contorted beyond breaking, but the red-eyed cat showed no signs of pain. The claws seeped their way into the back of her neck to get a grip on her spine. She cried out but made no sounds. Another paw slammed into her side, forcing the air from her chest.

Before she could cough, a third raked her ears. Warm blood quickly trickled down the sides of them. The paw shoved itself inside one of them, the tapping and sliding against her ear all she could hear. She could not think straight. She could not scream.

Have you earned this?

The red-eyed cat held its bobbed tail up and stopped the attacks. It clenched its jaw and narrowed its brow.

Have you earned this?

She wanted to scream, she wanted to run, but her body would not allow either. She was forced to answer:

Yes.

She struggled to say 'no'. She wanted to. She finally had some small amount of control, shouting the word over and over in her head. She demanded she speak it aloud. Her thoughts of that one word drowned over the roars and the invisible paw carving her ear and the inferno of hisses around her. One by one, the others turned away. First, the cat with the blue glowing eyes. They were the last she saw of it as the shadowy cat dissolved into ash. The hollow-eyed one turned away, taking a few glances at her before walking into the flames. The large one with the scores followed the same way, but hissed and slammed the ground the whole way. Its bloody nub of a tail continued leaking blood the whole way out, it quickly evaporating against the fires. It left her alone with the red-eyed one, still gripping her in its broken foreleg. It pulled her close.

You've earned this!

It tossed her away. More control returned to her body. She rolled from her back and to her paws. The orange and white of the fires were closing in, the chanting eyes along with them. The sky held back a menacing cloud of falling ash as the gurgling dark shadows of sky-monsters flew overhead. She braced herself, but before the cloud collapsed onto her, the fires vanished. The harsh heat was replaced with the cool, clear sky of greenleaf. It was pitch black, only one star shining in the sky. There was no moon, no clouds, and

no more sky-monsters. The twoleg nests were all fixed, untouched by the absent inferno. New voices floated through her ears; they were no longer scarred or bleeding. Her fur was clean and groomed. She felt no more pain. The air smelled of fresh water instead of ash. The ground was clean of soot. Her mind unscrambled as she relaxed with full control over her body. In front of her appeared a gray cat with bright brown spots she hardly saw through the mud covering every hair of her body. Small pools of blood dotted the puddle of water she sat in. There were no wraps anywhere on her body to stop it. She wiped the rest from her long face and struggled to lift her outstretched neck to meet Blackleaf's eyes. The gray she-cat wiped the mud from her face, her green eyes glowing through the dark night. Her whole body shaking, she stared straight into the sky and sighed. The voices around them grew silent. Even she refused to speak or reach out her paw. She watched the gray cat stare straight up into the starless night as intensely as she could. The cat instructed her to stand; she did so. She saw the tiny scratches that littered its body, all covered in a thinner layer of mud across her skin. The bald patches on her were a mix of red and brown. Her forelegs twisted under her weight for a moment. Her entire muzzle was coated in blood. But her eyes were still bright green, narrowed as closed as they could be. The gray cat smelled nice, though. She gave off the smell of lavender flowers.

I wish, it said, *I wish I could've told Fleetheart how sorry I was. I wish I could've buried my head in her fur forever, and tell her how very sorry I was. I'd never let her forget how much she meant to me... I miss her so much.*

She looked into the gray cat's eyes when she finally stared at her.

Are you Littlestar?

Even when I was broken and tired, I didn't give up on my goal. Now, I am survived by an infamous story and the resentment of all but a few of my closest companions. And now there is you, little one. Tell me. What do you think of my actions? What does the kin of my littermate make of the infamous Littlestar of the Axin Mess?

She looked at her paws. The ground beneath her was warm, but the puddle of bloody water made its way towards her. She did not back

away, though. She let it slowly seep under her.

I believe everything you did was genuinely for your comrades. I sought to complete your mission, even. But I hoped it would not cost me everything, like it did for you. How could a desire to be closer to my comrades do such a thing? I've lost them.

Little one, don't let yourself think you've lost them forever. My clanmates and allies died around me. The earth itself burned beneath me. And the sky struck us with lightning and blackened out the sun. There was no prey. There was no safety. There was no happiness. All I had left to give was my body. But in that moment of my death, I gave up on myself. Everything I did was in vain. Do not let it be the same for you. You may not have your clanmates, but you still have your friends. You still have your health. And you can still do something with that. Do not give those things up lightly.

I see what you mean now... Thank you, Littlestar.

'Thank you'... I lived my whole life hoping to hear those words at the very end. I'm glad they came from you.

The mud began to fall from Littlestar's fur, revealing lush brown spots all over. Her bald patches did not go away, but they stopped bleeding. She closed her eyes and let a gust of clean wind blow out her pelt. The two locked eyes briefly, her bright green ones lighting up the whole area. Littlestar smiled, waving her long tail back and forth. The single star in the night sky shined brighter. It took her attention briefly. Just briefly... The clouds in the sky returned. The hue turned red once more. The clear air was flooded with hot embers pelting against her sides. The inferno shot up around her; it incinerated the gray she-cat before her. Invisible claws raked her face and forced her to the ground. The cuts felt deeper than before. They dug all the way past her skin and tapped the bone. Her head erupted in pain. A thick mess of wet ash soiled the spot underneath her. All the spots she was bleeding before returned. And the dreaded pressure returned all over, keeping her hind legs in the air and pushing everything else down.

You will see nothing but me!

The red-eyed form returned, jamming its contorted paw into her head. She tried clenching her eyes shut, but she felt them forced open. Her jaw pried itself open. She choked on the soiled soot. Control over herself was lost, again.

I want to hear you say it.

The eyes surrounding her returned. Their jeering and the twoleg sirens wailed once more.

I said say it!

The voice of the red-eyed cat was breaking. She wanted to resist.

I have earned this... I'm sorry.

Her tongue moved itself again. The pressure on her back felt softer than before, but heavier. She could hardly even keep her hind paws up anymore, but she was forced to. The fires were close. A white glow surrounded her; the eyes were no longer visible. But she felt their presence. They mocked her, hollered, shouting she needed it worse. The invisible claws returned and began raking her sides. The voices drew closer. The pressure grew harder. The red-eyed shadow continued pinning her down, glaring. Power over her thoughts returned. She pushed the terror aside and thought of the others, but found no reason to want their company. Their appearances unsettled her. But she knew them all. She apologized to all of them quietly. Amidst the swirling smoke and the passing shadows of the sky-monsters, she saw a star. A single, bright star shining through everything. Fore mere heartbeats it put her mind at ease. But the red-eyed cat forced her down again. The fires grew closer. She could feel her temperature rising. It pained her above everything else. The fight in her legs sapped as she slammed against the damp soot. Her tongue shot out so she could pant; she swallowed mouthfuls of ash each time. Stinging attacked her paw pads and her fur became a prison for heat.

Sorry isn't good enough. And don't you dare give out on me. You still haven't received your sentence.

The sweltering inferno became unbearable. Not one drop of liquid

secreted from her paw pads. She knew she could not, either. It would only get worse. Then her tail parted itself. Her backside was lifted by a paw creeping under her belly. Her eyes shot open. She dared to look back. A fifth form was standing. Its long, gray fur was so matted the black tabby stripes were nearly hidden. One of its ears was missing, leaking blood it seemed to ignore. It reared up, jamming its clawless paws onto her back and biting her scruff. She could feel the cat bleeding from its neck onto the back of her own. It replaced the pressure. But it was not as harsh. She felt the form's muscles clench against her own. The bite on her scruff was gentle; It was holding back. This seemed to anger the red-eyed cat. But she lost sight of everything when it slid itself between her hind legs and inside her.

"Please, I'm sorry!"

Blackleaf's head thumped against a thin silvertube. She caught herself before she leapt between the supports and off the platform. She was back in control. Her paws were still tinted pink against her white fur, but the soot and ash was gone. She felt cold. Her paw pads no longer stung. The heat sweltering inside her and sapping her strength was gone, too. She slowly brushed her tail against her thighs; the unnatural pressure she felt from the shadowy cats left no traces but sent a shiver up her spine. The balconies were brightly lit. The sun was almost at its highest. Dozens of cats just slept where they watched her the prior night. Many were gone, though. She studied a few of them; their fur was much cleaner than she noticed. Their scents did not reek of dirt or thin-tar, nor were they subdued by mud. Many had no bald patches, no large scars, and no disfigurements. Blackleaf looked up at the harsh light coming from the holes in the ceiling. clouds were blocking out some of the sun, and more threatened to show. She tried tracing the source of the harsh light, finding only a reflection from bits of clear-stone fastened to the ceiling. At one point, her eyes went to the spot Reiz stood. Light bathed it, just as it did the prior night. She closed her eyes and tilted her head up a bit, taking gentle breaths in and out.

It can't be it, Blackleaf thought. *That can't be it. All of this has been for that one dream? Littlestar...*

She choked up thinking of the name. The image of the bleeding,

broken she-cat was still vivid in her mind. But so was her smile.

It couldn't have been a message for all clans. It was just for me. Littlestar, everyone hates me. I sacrificed everything for a message. Everything! And I get one just about me? The first communication from the Stars known to this region, and it's just about what I've done to hear it in the first place!? No!

Blackleaf struck the platform beneath her; some of the cats around her jolted. She felt her claws rake the holes. Ice caught under them. She shivered, but it snapped her calm. Closing her eyes again, she lowered her head.

Why did you disappear? Where did you go? Why won't you contact the clans? That's all I wanted to know. But I was shown twisted shadows of those I love the way... the way I see their disappointment. Just maybe, if you returned to us, their fears could be put at ease. If you returned, Wolfgang would still be alive. How can I be expected to shoulder the blame for this when you won't speak to any other cat? How could a goal to be closer to those I love be so twisted in the end? Littlestar, though. She told me not to give up on myself. I understand why she did... but how? How can I keep going against all this? When his blood is still on me.

She stood, looking at her outstretched leg tinted pink.

Littlestar... I understand the way you felt. When this happened to you, you said you lost everything. And all your actions were in vain when you gave up on the goal that cost you everything. But you failed. I failed. You know why you gave up on yourself. So do I but I... I think I do, at least. I just wanted to be closer to them. I wanted to be their champion. But I couldn't even see what was in front of me. Littlestar, Reiz, watch over me. I'm not strong enough to face what comes next. I must interpret your dream for them, not just what it means to me.

Blackleaf made her way towards the stairs.

The weather will turn in time. I need to figure out what I want, before they come for me... Littlestar, your skin was bleeding, your fur was revolting, and everything around you burned, but you still smiled at me. Was it encouragement to keep going? Forgiveness? Was it a warning?

Chapter 47

It was cold again. Her thin patches of fur began to fill. But the wounds themselves were scarring and scabbing; she resisted the urge to pick them. She bundled herself tight as she could. Even then, the snow continued to rain over the area, blocking everything from the evening sun to her view of the backlands. Everything was covered again. She sat atop a twoleg nest, a small one close to the snake-monster's silverpath. It was high enough to feel the occasional gust of wind run across her back. She balled up tighter whenever one happened. When snow creeped up on her sides, she brushed it away. It made the cold gray-stone roof no warmer, but she did it anyway. She could see the three looming nests that made up the Shadow's camp, though. She was focused on the shortest, the medicine den, shuttering when she looked at it for too long. Every few moments, a form left the camp's boundaries and headed for the bridge. None ever spotted her, nor did they look. It still made her shutter when one drew close enough to do so. She picked at the fur on her forearms, which were thin. The fur at the end of her tail was nearly chewed off. Hairs littered the roof around her, lost to the deep pawprints and white of the snow. Last, she glanced up at the sky. Still gray, and still no breaks to be seen. What would have been an orange glow in the sky was reduced to a slight blue tint on everything.

"Two days without the sun or stars," Blackleaf mumbled to herself. "Two days since that dream... and since I've seen Reiz. Was she even...? Do I have to face them first? Is that it?"

She counted the group running by. Twelve made their way towards the bridge. Some had fake-fur wraps on them. They did not hang near the back, nor did the others slow to not push them. They all ran in a unified urgency. Out of the corner of her eye, Blackleaf spotted one running from the structures behind her. She stood and propped herself onto the broken ledge that revealed it to her. Even some of the strays came out of hiding to witness the stranger running through their territory. Two of the Shadow patrols grouped

up on the third cat and ran towards the river. The third, however, stayed in her sight.

"No," Blackleaf mumbled. "I'm not ready."

She backed away from the eldge and jumped back to her spot, curling up and staring at the break in the ledge.

"It's too soon. Why now? Why can't—"

"Blackleaf..."

The voice was faint, lost to a gust of wind. Blackleaf's ears perked up and pinned the source. The cat had reached the edge of the building. Her heart began pounding against her chest; she tried in vain to calm it. Her paws were numb. The tips of her ears hurt. She found herself creeping towards the ledge, anyway.

"I know it's you up there." The voice was light, familiar. "I saw your eyes. The patrols are gone. It's just us... I'm scared, Blackleaf. Please don't hide from me."

Her ears fell, but she felt at ease. Blackleaf took a deep breath and walked towards the hole in the ledge. She sat in full view of the white cat a tree-length below. She was standing in the thick snow, her wide, blue eyes piercing the weather. And her fluffy tail lay carelessly buried. But she still noticed it wrapped around her paws.

"It's... Hello, Angelika," Blackleaf said.

"I was told to just watch you but... I don't know if that still matters," Angelika said, her voice breaking.

"What's wrong?"

"The bridge. There's a full-blown battle! Just like that night during the snowstorm, where you left..." Angelika trailed off, her ears shooting up and her mouth covered by her paw. "My Stars, I'm so sorry. I—"

"You shouldn't apologize for something I did," Blackleaf said. She purred a bit when she mentioned the Stars. "It's good to see you

safe. Now tell me, what's happening? Why doesn't watching me matter anymore?"

"It's Solestar. She's been ordering thorough searches of the backlands for days and nights, blocking any hole large enough for a cat to fit. She says without the Star Covenant enclave or underground entrances, we can withdraw our patrols from the backlands and focus on taking the bridge. Now a snowstorm's moving in, so she gave the order early. She wants to finish UnderClan for good this time."

The fur on the back of Blackleaf's neck crawled. Her paws started tapping.

"Where's Solestar?" she asked.

"She's just as eager as they are," Angelika said. "She's leading the second wave near the underside of the bridge. I think she's trying to trick them or something."

"She's trying to split them up," Blackleaf said. "The numbers she gained locking down the backlands could make up for those out with blackcough or injured from the previous battle. While UnderClan has no such reserve of warriors. Whoever was injured badly enough that night I ran away would still be out. If Solestar pushes past the bridge this time, it's all over for them."

Angelika looked at her paws, her ears flattening.

"This day would come eventually," Blackleaf said. "Seems like the Star Covenant was the—"

"This is wrong," Angelika whispered.

Blackleaf's ears swiveled towards the she-cat, whose tail burst from the snow and flicked behind her.

"So many are going to die," she continued. "I know ancestor clans don't follow the warrior code but... there has to be some rule about killing for us, too, right? Remember when I told you I didn't hate the under cats? That night we watched the snake-monster go by?"

Blackleaf nodded.

"You seemed like you were really thinking, so I didn't tell you. All the whispers I hear about you. Or the rumors. Our clan doesn't like you, Blackleaf. It sickens me. You're such a kind medicine cat, who didn't care where I was from or what anyone had been through. Then I watched them demand your... that... repulsive act! How could they. How dare they! Even Solestar went along with it. But I knew you better. You said everything you were doing was for them. I still believe that."

The young cat was looking at the washed-out view of her camp, tail draped over the broken ledge.

"I don't want to bring you back to a victorious Solestar and watch some tom have his way with you next time you're in heat," Angelika growled. "You don't deserve that. StarClan wouldn't approve, I'm sure of it. Come with me. These clans aren't the only cat groups in *berlin*. No one will notice if we leave the peninsula now. I know where we can—"

"Angelika, no," Blackleaf said calmly.

"But, but, I know your friends and kin and... I can't protect you. You don't deserve any of this. I have to do something! Right?"

Blackleaf sighed, walking away from the ledge.

"Blackleaf?"

The young cat walked to the opposite end of the roof. A plank of wood led to several silverwood boxes stacked next to the twoleg nest. She carefully hopped to each one, descending as quick as she could. When she was close enough to the ground, she jumped into the soft snow. Blackleaf dug herself out. Angelika had walked to the back of the nest, her ears flattening when she saw her. But Blackleaf ran up to the older she-cat and wrapped her neck around her. She purred, pulling her close and burying her face in the long fur on her shoulders. Angelika's eyes were wide, but quickly calmed when she returned the gesture, closing her eyes and purring. Blackleaf reared up, sliding her front legs around Angelika's shoulders and holding

her tight. She felt her breathing slow. The sting of the heavy snowfall left her. Even her tail wrapped itself around the older she-cat's legs; Angelika's returned the favor. Blackleaf could feel the other's heartbeat pound through her chest.

"I just... I don't know what to do," Angelika mewed.

"You don't have to do anything but survive," Blackleaf said.

"But what about you?"

"I want to face what I've done. But not her way."

Blackleaf gently slid herself from the older she-cat's shoulders and sat. Angelika leaned close to her before backing away, shaking her head out.

"I had a pretty terrifying dream," Blackleaf said. "It was more like a nightmare, actually. I'm certain it was from StarClan, but I can't confirm it. I need to speak with Fleetheart and Flyfoot."

"One of them should be at camp," Angelika said, pointing to the distant medicine den. "I'll make sure no one lays a paw on you."

"No. Stay here. Go back to camp. Just don't fight in that battle. I need to help my comrades."

"*Help* them!? They wanted to force mate you."

"They're still the ones I did all this for. And you... I just don't want anyone else dying because of me. Or for me."

"But Blackleaf—"

"Please." The young cat lowered her head and pressed it into the she-cat's chest. "A... she-cat living in these twoleg nests told me about her regrets. And they were frightening. Justified or not, I can't just run away from any of this. Not again. I promise you, I have no intention of walking to my death. Trust me, again. Please."

"I... I can't force you to do anything, Blackleaf... I trust you. Do what you think is right."

Blackleaf backed away from Angelika, the cold air flowing through her fur once more. Angelika leaned forward and nuzzled Blackleaf's cheek before walking past her. She took one last glance at the young cat before darting around the other side of the twoleg nest. Blackleaf stood, shaking the loose snow from her fur, and pushed herself forward. The snow was growing deeper. She ran to the opposite side of the nest and around the corner, heading for the silverpath. The closer she got, the shallower the snow. The silver rails barely stuck out over the top of the white. She carefully balanced on top of one and made her way towards the bridge. The closer she grew to its massive structure in the distance, the more her heartbeat rose. She started hearing the echoes of hisses and cries. The snow was beaten by dozens of sets of paws near the silverpath. The few she did see running towards the bridge did not notice her, even when they passed her. When the distant forms of the fighting came into view, her fur shook down to her skin.

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The stench of blood was powerful even through the worsening wind. Blackleaf rubbed snow over her nose, numbing it but doing nothing for the rancid scents. The screams of the warriors constantly pulled for her attention. Whenever she overcame the smell enough to move forward from her fear, the cries would echo through her ears and make her hesitate. They overpowered the wind and the creaking of the silverwood supports holding the bridge together. The towering beams themselves were hidden by the snow the wind stirred around. But on the bridge, itself, it did not blow around. Stamped flat by the paws of hundreds of cats, she could hardly see in without approaching the fighting. Her paws hardly let her. Occasionally a shape flung itself into the air, or the skittering of claws under the snow made her glance around. Several Shadow warriors coming from camp passed her; none even glanced her way. Blackleaf walked towards the edge of the bridge, not daring to hop on the support. There was not so much as a gurgle beneath the massive chunks of ice floating downstream. Mist and snow blew from the tops of them and up, making the wind much

worse than it was. Blackleaf stayed near the edge to avoid blocking the path for the others. Her attention was pulled by a warrior limping away from the fighting. He stopped to glance at her before continuing on. She spotted the young cat on its back; the brown fur and scar across her muzzle made her heart skip a beat. The she-cat apprentice's tail was limp across the warrior's back. She still even had the injuries from the night she was rescued from UnderClan. Blood trickled from the back of her neck; Blackleaf reached for her absent medicine vest, simply following the pair when she remembered it was gone. The warrior also had blood on its claws and teeth and missing tufts of fur from his belly. He took the she-cat apprentice to the edge of the bridge, clearing snow from a spot and gently setting her down. He reared his head up and yelped four times before running past Blackleaf and straight back to the fighting. She ran to the she-cat apprentice and parted the fur around her neck. She growled, but had no strength to smack her away. The wound was deep, but Blackleaf was relieved she was still breathing. When she looked up, another warrior was in front of her. Also not paying her a second glance, she lifted the injured apprentice onto her back and quietly limped towards camp, disappearing in the flurry of snow.

"Orders..."

Blackleaf heard yelling nearby. A tom said it, and the silhouette of a pair was just ahead. One was larger, balancing dangerously on the ledge of the bridge. It held itself against the power of the wind and snow, looking off into the mess that obscured the border. One ran off, leaving the one on the ledge alone. Blackleaf took a deep breath, coughing when she remembered the stench of blood in the wind. Her paws were numb from the cold but frozen against the cries of so many at the border. She forced one in front of the other to walk towards the lone cat. Each step seemed to make the cries of the battle louder. But when she finally stepped on the bridge in full, she shuttered. Misty drops of blood covered parts of the snow. The slightest tinge of it remained on her paws. She kept going, her heart pounding and her ears folded back. The one on the ledge finally came in view. Its head turned to see her. Its white coat was covered in familiar brown and orange spots, bobbed tail wedged defiantly against her thighs and the ledge. Its claws were out. Blackleaf

looked behind her. More were heading towards the stairs to the underside platforms.

"Yes, there's fighting under there, too." The deep voice crept up her spine all the way to her tail. "I didn't think I'd see you here."

"Solestar," Blackleaf said. "I saw them. I'm certain I saw StarClan."

"We can discuss that later." Not a hint of agitation in Solestar's voice. "You had to show up now of all times. One way or another, though, you'd be there for your comrades. One way or another..."

Blackleaf was nearly frozen at the sight of her leader. She reared up on the ledge. Her eyes finally began to break the noise of the weather and see what her leader did. The Shadows were standing in a massive line of dozens of cats stretching to both sides of the bridge. They were backed by another, identical line. Each step they took forward was in unison, slowly pushing against the tide of UnderClan warriors. They threw themselves at the line. Several slammed into one spot in unison. They quickly mauled the cat in that position and tried shoving through the Shadow's line. The aggressors were quickly engulfed by her comrades and battered by a flurry of blows. Drops of blood were flung up each time one of the Shadows hit the pile of dying cats. Her own claws dug into the snow. The small drops of red already covered the bridge's ledge near where she was. Solestar was even standing on some of it. It was just like the snow in front of her. Just like the dots that passed her vision in the wind. Around her were the imprints of dozens of cats, dragged away or left in the snow where they fell. The bodies were already being covered by the weather. She could not recognize any, but they made her clench up. She hopped down from the ledge and walked towards the fighting. Solestar rushed in front of her.

"I... I can't see that well from here," Blackleaf said. "They need my help—"

"They're dead, Blackleaf. Flyfoot will tend to them." Strength returned to Solestar's voice. "You know our standard battle formations just as well as any warrior. Listen closely. Do you at least know why we haven't won yet?"

Blackleaf slowly peered her head to the side of Solestar to see the fighting. Her ears swiveled forward. Three UnderClan warriors lay dead where they tried to break the Shadow's line. But they did not advance. She squinted and sniffed close, trying to see past the fighting and smell past the blood. She saw two massive forms behind the UnderClan formation. Their long, black pelts were tossed around by the wind. But the seething howls they made flattened her ears.

"It can't be!" Blackleaf said.

"That's right." Solestar rested a paw on Blackleaf's shoulder. "The dogs decided to help Clementstar, after all."

"But I saw them. I—"

"You didn't have to do anything for them." Solestar's claws dug past the young cat's shoulder. "Heidi has always wanted me dead. Maybe she convinced the others to follow or something. What I'm more concerned with is the Star Covenant."

"They're here, too!?"

"Yes." Solestar pointed to one of the dead bodies nearby. "That one was marked with three claw marks on its right flank. That's their symbol. Rye rushed them to UnderClan territory immediately after we took theirs, clearly. But why take a side? The Star Covenant wants both clans in ruin. Her powers are farce. But she scared our warriors more than the under cats'. So why take a side?"

"Solestar, your claws—"

"One little medicine cat spent too much time with our enemies and convinced them we are evil, perhaps?"

"Solestar, your claws are hurting me—"

"That pack of desperate canids, I understand a last-minute decision to help. But why Rye? Why would she do such a thing?" Anger seethed in the leader's words.

Blackleaf fought against the claws. "I don't know. She was obsessed

with—"

"*You!* She is doing this because of you!"

Solestar smacked the young cat.

"She only seems to show herself when you're hanging around the backlands. She looks at you different, doesn't she? You mean something to her. Does she mean something to you?"

"No!"

"Of course she does! You hate us. You hate me! Why didn't you tell me about her? You let her fantasize about you. I bet you fled *to* her!"

"I didn't know. I swear, she just—"

"There are warrior-rah pushing against our battle line right now. And you *didn't know* the signs the Covenant leader was obsessed with you? Do you have any idea how valuable that information could have been? If I knew just how far she'd go for you, I would've killed her in UnderClan and slain her followers to the last..."

Solestar leaned closer to Blackleaf's scruff. But she squirmed away and took off along the railing. Her leader was close behind.

"Don't you run away from me!" Solestar hissed. "She can't have you!"

Blackleaf found herself off the bridge, the silverpath peeking above the snow. She noticed several more warriors coming from the fog. She rounded the corner of a support beam and into a thick pile of snow, bursting out the other side and tumbling down the icy steps leading to the underside, thumping at the bottom close to the unguarded edge of a platform.

"Blackleaf!" Solestar carefully walked down the steps and sniffed the young cat. Blackleaf stood, rubbing her head and locking eyes with the leader. "Are you okay? Nothing's broken?"

The young cat scrambled away, forcing her claws against the icy

holes of the platform to keep stable. When it got no more stable than the stairs she slowed to a walk, staying as close to the center of the platforms as she could to keep the winds from throwing her over the unguarded sides. Coming from the right, Blackleaf reached the intersection of paths branching off from the left and right side of the bridge. The narrow platform had a couple of cats moving to and from it. The evening light barely lightened the scene, with only small points of lights along the bottom edges of the bridge. She felt the platforms rocking steadily back and forth, ice covering the evenly spaced holes and forcing all the wind around her paws. The smell of blood in the air was strong, but there was nothing floating around with the kicked-up snow. She looked over the side. The bodies of dozens lay on the blocks of ice, some sliding into the river on a wind gust. A cry further ahead snapped her to the center platforms. She ran past the first wide platform and down the narrow path to the second, which was just cleared of UnderClan warriors. The Shadows were standing on the narrow one, pushing into UnderClan's reinforcements on the third wide platform marking the center of the bridge. One of them lunged past the line and into a Shadow, grappling it and tossing both off the bridge. Both screams were silenced by the wind. On the platform itself lay three dead cats. Two were shoved off the edge by a Shadow cat; one was carried back by an injured one. He passed Blackleaf. Both the tom's eyes were clawed and covered in fresh blood. His balance was failing from his shredded tail. Before she could catch him, he stumbled over the edge with no fight to reorient himself. He joined his dead comrade when both landed in the frigid water. Looking forward, the Shadow warriors continued shoving UnderClan back, their formation a risky six-wide to UnderClan's four-wide. They clawed and kicked at each other's lines. One occasionally grabbed the muzzle of another to drag them over. Amidst the blood, however, Blackleaf's nose curled against a mysterious scent that came in wafts from UnderClan's side.

"Blackleaf." Solestar was right behind her.

"I shouldn't have come here," Blackleaf whispered, her eyes locked on the fighting.

"I left my post to chase you. Amidst this battle, of all places, you

just show up. And you can't even keep a tom from falling. Even now, you act in your own best interest. Selfish little one." Solestar's flash of anger vanished when she spotted the split-tailed tom. "Leaftail. Where are your reinforcements?"

Blackleaf spun around. Her heart pounded against her chest when she saw his split tail waving through the wind, signaling to three warriors further behind him. Leaftail's tan fur was dotted with blood, but he looked uninjured. Scratches had healed over his face. His green eyes were wide when they gazed on her. But he shook it off and focused back on his leader. He frowned.

"Why is she here?" There was anger in his voice.

"Don't worry about her," Solestar said. "I'm taking care of it. Where are the other warriors?"

His eyes narrowed. "I left them on the surface. Two dogs joined the fighting and halted our advance. I've brought just three."

Solestar nodded. "Then we'll do what we can to—"

The howl pierced through all the shouting and hissing, and the wind itself. Even the cracking ice below could not drown out what made Blackleaf's fur stand on end. Everyone looked up, even the UnderClan cats.

"Clear path!" The order came from an UnderClan cat.

As quick as their line broke and before the Shadows could push out, the silhouette of a massive dog appeared on the narrow platform in front of them. Leaftail and the three warriors immediately charged and took the spot of the two it smashed off the platform. A blood streak was left where the warriors fought just heartbeats before. The dog's wide, brown eyes were carefully glancing between the pair on the large platform behind the four new warriors aggressively blocking her path.

"Impossible!" Solestar said. "I thought all the dogs were on the surface. There wasn't supposed to be one down here."

"Solestar!" the dog shouted, looking straight at her. "There you are."

The UnderClan warriors scrambled behind the large dog, two remaining just under her hind legs. She nearly took up the width of the platform, the much wider one in the center just a few steps away for her. Blackleaf's view of the fighting on the platform further ahead was blocked; the Shadows on the other side of the dog were boxed in. The desperate screams they made were drowned out by a massive gust of wind that forced even the war dog to hold still. Leaftail took the opportunity to form himself with the other three, two up front and two behind them. The dog's eyes snapped open and she slashed at his group. All four dodged and ducked, taking advantage of the dog's wide frame to roll around the narrow platform. It nearly lost its footing, but backed away before Leaftail could bite its ankle. The UnderClan cats behind the dog swiveled around to push against the trapped Shadows. All were boxing each other in. The dog reared its head up and howled. Blackleaf spotted the deep, bald scar that ran from the bottom of its neck to the back of its thigh. It was covered with snow, but it showed through regardless. Even Leaftail's group was taken aback by it.

"Heidi," Solestar whispered.

"You're lucky I want to outlive you! Or I'd let these four claw my stomach open *just* so I could kill you!" Heidi roared. "*Meien ehre heißt treue zu lhre ende,* Solestar!"

Solestar's posture began to buckle. Her fur was standing on end, shivering. Her heavy paws cracked the ice beneath them. She turned around several times; no more Shadows came from the stairs.

"I should get help," Blackleaf mewed.

"You will stay right here," Solestar said.

Before she could compose herself, her ears shot up. She leapt back; Blackleaf followed instinctively. Two cats sailed through the air above Heidi, ready to land on the wide platform they occupied. When they did, Blackleaf's heart skipped a beat. Solestar dropped her stance and readied to pounce. The tan tom with the black muzzle and paws landed less graceful, the charm around his ankle clanging against the ice. The she-kit backed away from Solestar

after overshooting the jump. Her green and blue odd eyes were unmistakable. Solestar's muscles swelled through her flared fur.

"I don't believe this," she growled.

"Don't turn!" Leaftail shouted one of the warriors beside him back to formation. "Do *not* take your eyes off the dog."

"*Both* leaders? Is this some kind of joke!?" Solestar's breaths were heavy. "What I said earlier was true, wasn't it, Blackleaf? Every word?"

Blackleaf briefly locked eyes with Rye. The she-kit's white fur was clean of any blood, as was Clementstar's. Rye nodded; Solestar pushed a paw into the side of Blackleaf's neck and slid her to the narrow platform behind her. The she-kit's muscles bulged against her fur.

"Blackleaf..." Rye whispered.

"What about her!?" Solestar hissed. "What do you want with her!?"

"I want her safe," Rye growled. "She deserves more than to be pawned off to some tom, who *you* executed, just for wanting to heal the spiritual health of her clan. Target or not, I refuse to watch her die by my power."

"What gives you the *right* to say anything like that? I'm the only one who can protect her from the others. You're just some infatuated little kit who doesn't know what Blackleaf's done!"

"I'm asking you once," Clementstar said. "Surrender. Your clan will be allowed to—"

"Surrender?" Solestar hissed, widening her stance. Her hind legs shattered the ice underneath, letting her claws poke through the platform's holes. "I've only laid eyes on you twice in my life, and that's all you have to say? Bold words for a coward of a leader who hides underground and clings to the obsolete warrior code. The Clan of False Shadows will wipe your clan out, and you with it! And you, kit... I will have your head for harassing Blackleaf. You stay away from her!"

Clementstar narrowed his eyes. "Last chance. Your odds aren't good in this fight."

"Even if my lifeless body was in your jaws, we'd never surrender!" Solestar hissed. "But it will be the other way around. It was foolish of you to come without assistance."

"Blackleaf, you are going to be okay," Rye said, glancing at the young cat.

"Don't you *dare* twist her anymore!"

"I am not twisting her! This land needs her. I need her—"

Clementstar leapt in time to take a blow to the side for Rye, who leapt out of the way. He dodged the second swipe and leapt opposite of Rye. They charged her from opposite sides. Blackleaf backed further on the narrow platform, eyes wide.

Solestar crouched and shot her hind legs into Clementstar's side. He lost footing and slid away. Rye struck her left; the kit widened her stance and struck again. Solestar reared up, but the she-kit slammed into her chest. The Shadow leader fell hard on her back. Rye leapt at her. Solestar's hind legs were buried into Rye's chest and sent her flying to the edge of the wide platform. She barely regained footing in time.

Solestar charged but was dragged down by Clementstar, who leapt on her back. He pinned her to the ground, gripping the ice with all four of his legs. Rye ran over to rake her eyes. She was held back by the she-cat's massive paws. Solestar picked herself up and spun around, tossing Clementstar into Rye and almost sending both over the side.

They stood. Blackleaf spotted the tom's paws shaking.

Rye pushed off an ice-free spot and leapt close enough to swipe at Solestar's head. She dodged it and retaliated. Rye ducked and smacked the Shadow leader twice in the nose. Solestar's attacks were dodged again as Rye struck the same spot, putting her shoulder into it. Rye finally drew blood. Solestar had a sizable cut

through her nostril. Before she put a paw to it, Clementstar jumped to tackle her.

Solestar rolled into the lunge and ended up on her back. She dug her claws into the UnderClan leader's belly fur, tangling both. He grunted as he tried to get away from her. She clamped down on his neck, raking his belly deeper. Blood began dripping onto her hind claws as the tom ignored the pain to keep Solestar from breaking his neck. Clementstar's muffled groans were long; he was holding back screams. Rye loomed over Solestar's head. The Shadow leader let go of the tom to dodge the she-kit's attack and roll back to her paws. He fell to his belly and clenched his jaw, the ice underneath painted with his blood.

Rye swiped once; Solestar dodged and shot her paw forward. Rye ducked and raked the top of her resting paw. The Shadow leader winced, but Rye didn't stop. She jumped and raked her face. As she came down, she ran her claws over the same paw. Solestar tried to grapple her. Rye slid under her, rolling on her back and raking her belly. She dodged a kick from behind and slid out of range.

Blackleaf cringed every time Solestar was injured. But she kept watching.

Solestar dropped her stance as low as she could and hissed. Her hind legs flexed and shattered the ice beneath her. She was fixed on the white she-kit, bending her front paws and ready to pounce. Rye's own muscles bulged as she slowly approached the older she-cat. She flicked her tail to the left; Solestar did not flinch. Both were close to an edge of the platform, Solestar standing closer to Blackleaf. She hardly saw Clementstar's charge when Rye yelped. But her footing was assured by a spot with no ice. She jumped her back to Clementstar and bucked her rear paws into the tom, one in his neck and one between his eyes. Solestar's front claws snapped inside the holes in the platform but stopped the tom's charge completely. She gritted her teeth and cried through them, but the UnderClan leader fell flat. Not even a twitch from him as he was pushed away by Solestar.

Rye's composure vanished. Her eyes were wide. Blackleaf's too. Solestar wiped the blood from the cuts on her nose and glared at

the kit, not once tending to the blood dripping from her broken claws. It already began freezing over. She pushed them back to the ice and returned to her crouch. Her bright green eyes were wide and twitching back the pain. Her breathing was heavy enough for her chest to move up and down through her thick fur.

"Clement!" Heidi barked.

"My Stars," Blackleaf whispered. "Solestar—"

"I told you, you can't have her!" Solestar hissed.

Rye bore her fangs and reared up at the charging Shadow leader. Dodging, the she-kit pushed off her rear paws and leapt on Solestar's back. She bucked and charged to the left edge of the platform. Rye jumped off; Solestar barely stopped herself with her hind paws. The Shadow leader dodged the flurry of swipes from Rye and kicked her away. Rye rolled onto her back and thrust her thighs up, kicking her hind legs straight up. Solestar sidestepped and clamped down on her leg. The she-kit cried out as she was thrown to the other side of the platform.

She scrambled to her injured paw in time to dodge Solestar's charge; she again slowed herself with her rear paws and attacked with her injured front paws. Rye dodged, but Solestar turned and kicked the she-kit away. Rye caught herself on the ice-free part left by Solestar's broken claws, blood now covering her paws. Solestar charged again. Rye jumped clear over her, but didn't see the large she-cat slow on her hind legs. Rye's same leg was caught in her opponent's jaw and tossed across the platform. Rye held her scream, but it took her longer to stand.

The she-kit dodged the first swing. The second drew blood below her eye. A large gust of wind flew across the platform; she used it to launch herself from her three good legs into the air and onto Solestar's back. Before Solestar landed herself on her back, Rye jumped off and swiped at her face. Solestar blocked it with her front paws, wincing and flicking blood from her claws into the she-kit's eyes. Rye backed away and shook. Flinching from putting weight on it, Solestar reared herself up by thrusting her front paws down. She almost hit Rye, who ran straight at and under her to clamped down

on her bobbed tail. Solestar didn't even flinch. She clenched her eyes shut and dug her front paws into the ice-free spot she occupied, swinging them around to swing the she-kit off. Solestar's eyes shot open as she cried out. Rye barely had time to stand before the Shadow leader was on top of her, slamming her bloody paw onto the back of her neck. Rye struggled to keep balance against each heavy blow. Before she could roll away, Solestar snatched her scruff in her jaws and started shaking. Rye's limp body could do nothing but yelp against it. Each jolt to the left and right twisted her body in the opposite direction. Solestar tossed her to the other side of the platform; Rye barely stopped herself from sliding off.

Blackleaf couldn't peel her eyes from the scene. She watched the blood ooze from the she-kit's scruff, and drip from her leader's front claws and nose. Solestar's breathing was deliberate to calm her; Rye panted for relief. Clementstar was still down, constantly eyed by one of the warriors fending off Heidi. She could not help it anymore; the warrior broke formation and faced Clementstar's unconscious body. Before she could take a step, Heidi reached over the other three and snatched her in her jaw. She barely had time to scream before her ribs were crushed by the weight of the war dog's bite. She was tossed into the other three, who dodged it. The warrior left a red streak across the center of the platform and stopped in front of Blackleaf. The she-cat twitched several more times before her crushed chest was still, the fang holes left by Heidi leaking gore from her punctured muscles. Blackleaf rested a paw on her chest and removed it when she felt the broken bones shift under her weight. Her nose twitched. She could smell Rye above the blood-laced wind.

Rye hissed but sidestepped to avoid Solestar's pounce. Her eyes shot open and her muzzle was clenched tight. With one front and one rear paw stable on the ice, she swiped at Solestar with the remaining two. Both swipes connected. While spinning, she switched her front and rear paws to their opposites and struck again. Her turnaround hit, too. Solestar absorbed the blows and let blood drip from the new gashes in her cheeks and brow. She crouched against Rye's third spinning strike and bit the same injured leg again. Rye was tossed across the platform screaming as she stopped just short of falling off. She kept moaning when she

tried standing, fighting to silence herself. Solestar approached, lifting the she-kit in her front paw and slamming her down. She pinned Rye, ignoring the pain of her broken claws. Solestar rolled Rye onto her back and pushed into her chest.

"That's what I want to hear from you, kit," Solestar hissed in Rye's face.

Rye struggled to keep her mouth clenched. Solestar slid her paw just above the kit's ribs and pushed. Rye closed her eyes and scratched the large she-cat's belly, pulling tufts of fur without drawing blood.

"Stop struggling!" Solestar pressed harder. "Cry out for help. I want them to hear it."

Rye whimpered. She pushed against the massive paw on her chest in vain. When she glanced at Blackleaf, Solestar slapped her and forced her attention back, keeping up the pressure with her hind leg instead.

"Don't look at her!" Solestar hissed. "You don't get her. You lost."

Solestar pressed harder; Rye's eyes shot open and she let out a scream that perked Heidi's ears. Even Leaftail looked back at what was happening, for just a moment. Rye kept crying out and scratching the Shadow leader's chest and neck. When Solestar pushed up under her chest, her cries turned to shrieks that made even Blackleaf look away. Her torment was diluted by the strengthening wind.

Solestar leaned close. "I want all of them to know you couldn't do anything for my Blackpaw!"

"Solestar, stop!"

Blackleaf slowly walked across the platform and towards the pair. Her eyes met her former leader's. Solestar's were wide. The cut under them stopped bleeding, as did the gash on her nose and her broken front claws. Yet, she did not show one bit of pain. The rest of the fighting, the blood-laced wind, the snow pelting her side, all

seemed to stop when she lay eyes on the she-kit up close. Rye's breathing was still shallow and gasping against the weight of Solestar's paw thrust in her chest. She did not move it one bit. She reached out a paw to Blackleaf, but settled for running her tail against her. When Solestar finally let her go, she hacked up bile and was bleeding from her belly. Blackleaf was kept from tending to it; she could hardly bring herself forward to even touch the she-kit. Opening her eyes was slow, but she could not hide the pain she was in. Blackleaf studied them carefully. The eyelids were low, and the odd blue and green pair had red lines running through them. Her skin was bruised underneath, surrounding them with black rings. Solestar gently rested a paw on the she-kit's cheek, nudging her head back to her own eyes.

"She..." Rye took a moment to soften her breathing. "She left your clan. She ran away from you... StarClan believes she is meant for more than your sick purposes. I still believe in her. Why do you still hold... hold on to her?"

The shadow leader leaned close. "I don't like hurting her. I don't like seeing our clan's hatred grow for her day after day. You may believe her actions necessary, but they go against her clan and comrades. And your infatuation doesn't change that." She slammed her paw into the kit's belly. "But, if you really wanted her back, you wouldn't have brought such a lousy fighter."

Solestar shoved Rye forward. Her eyes widened when she slipped over the edge.

"No!"

Blackleaf scrambled to catch her, almost going over herself. Rye already slammed against two piles of snow and hard against a block of ice in the center of the river. Small pats of blood were left where she hit, and another splayed out under where she landed. Blackleaf tried to look into her eyes, but they were too far away. Rye lay motionless among the bodies of Shadows and UnderClan cats alike. The ice was painted with their blood. Rye's poured out to join it all. The cries of the fighting no longer concerned her. The wind stopped. Her heartbeat slowed. She reached out for the she-kit below. So much so that she was grabbed by her tail and tossed

closer to the center.

"You hardly knew her," Solestar growled. "Why do you suddenly care? Unless you spoke to her in—"

"Solestar, just...!" Blackleaf froze, her eyes focused on the shattered ice beneath her paws.

The Shadow leader gripped Blackleaf's shoulders in her paw and dragged her towards the narrow platform leading to the stairs. Several warriors descended and ran to their position. Solestar made way for them and turned to face the chaotic platform behind them.

"Kill Clementstar on your way—"

Solestar froze, her ears flattening and her jaw agape. Her grip on Blackleaf vanished; she turned to see why. The Shadow warriors behind Heidi had been slaughtered. Some fled between her legs, covered by Leaftail's group. His paws and muzzle were soaked in blood. The war dog hardly had any on herself, but had several fresh scratches across her muzzle. She kicked one of the retreating warriors from the platform. Leaftail leapt at her, but Heidi snatched him in her jaws and shook him around. The new warriors from the surface all leapt at her and attempted to free him, biting and scratching. Heidi kicked three from the platforms and wrestled the rest away, leaping to the larger platform and over Clementstar. She widened her stance and kicked away the warriors trying to free Leaftail; she tossed him away after he stopped struggling, close to the edge where Rye was pushed off. Another caught him in time. Blackleaf's cry was muted by a gust of wind. The UnderClan warriors on the narrow platform the war dog left were barely held by the rest of the Shadows. But Heidi turned around and began biting the backs of their necks and stomping their heads into the ice. Leaftail was screaming, blood pouring from several new holes in his side. Blackleaf could not help; she was shuffled away by Solestar. He, Clementstar, and the others were lost in the ensuing mess of hisses, snow-laden wind, and blood. Another warrior limped down the stairs, her fur stained red.

"Two dogs on the surface... pushed us back," she panted. "Three senior warriors dead. And more warrior-rah from the Covenant

came. Everyone down here will be surrounded soon!"

"Leaftail is incapacitated," Solestar said. "Organize a retreat of the survivors down here and hold up my den. I'll alert camp to prepare for a siege."

The senior warrior looked down at her leader's broken claws, frozen over and turning black. Her ears flattened. Solestar slammed a paw on her shoulders.

"Organize them. Save them!" She yelled.

"Of-Of course!" The senior warrior nodded and joined the fray, her shouting lost in it.

Solestar carefully dragged Blackleaf across the narrow platform and back towards the stairs. The large platform near them was empty, all the Shadows having joined the fight. The stairs were clear. She gripped Blackleaf's long tail in her jaws and began her ascent. The young she-cat did not try to free herself. Her ears were still pinned to the sides of her head. Her pupils were wide against the force of the wind. She no longer felt the sting of the cold. Dozens more poured from the stairs on the other side of the bridge and headed towards the fight. Some were injured. Others were fresh and charged headfirst into it. They were calling out to their comrades. Nothing came from Blackleaf's mouth.

Chapter 48

The massive fake-fur cover was pressed tightly against the large opening of the medicine den. Warriors outside pushed the rocks in place, perfectly pinning it. It would have been pitch black, if not for the flickering twoleg lights and massive hole in the ceiling. Even so, the night sky was blocked by unrelenting weather. The eerie warmth floating throughout the den was contrasted by a chill running along the stone walls. It turned to a whistle when it reached the underground hallways beyond. The den was crowded with injured and sick cats. Solestar directed Blackleaf forward. She followed, but focused on her comrades. One by one, they looked at her. Some saw their fur stand on end. Others were coughing and huddling among fake-fur blankets in bunches. Blackleaf heard claws scraping at the gray-stone. The shades of many eyes against it were impossible to ignore. She did not try to, either. Solestar led her down the ramped entrance and left around the massive pile of rubble occupying the center of the den. She only stopped and flinched when she heard the distant war dogs howl again. All of them did. Even with the torrent outside, they were audible. But the cats remained silent. Blackleaf tried to focus on something else once Solestar began walking again. Fresh snow quickly melted and drained into the gutters along the walls. The slightly higher right side had no scent. The left where they walked reeked of bile and urine.

Blackleaf's eyes searched the medicine den. "Where are they?"

"Flyfoot is likely tending to your littermate in the twoleg nests the strays live," Solestar whispered. "Fleetheart is in the warrior's den, as I've ordered."

The older she-cat turned around to make sure she was still being followed. The two made it around the rubble pile and to the back of the den. Before walking through the narrow cutout in the wall, they saw dozens of ready warriors. Many had their ears and tails pinned to their bodies, but none were seriously injured. Solestar glanced at

them.

"Leaf-Leaftail told us to wait here," one of them mewed.

"Did he now?" Solestar said.

"He said to watch for any raids and defend Fleetheart. He said it was in case an underground entrance to the backlands was unaccounted for, or if the Star Covenant or war dogs came in from the other side of the peninsula. He also took Fleetheart's advice that we might still be contagious."

"Smart choice. Though, both the Covenant and the war dogs fought on the bridge." Solestar noticed the tom was fixed on the frozen blood of her broken front claws. "I'll be back in a moment."

"I'm ready to protect my comrades. Are things... going well out there?"

Solestar sighed. "Wake the others. I'll be back in a moment."

The tom nodded and waved his tail left and right. The warriors crowded along the back wall began waking their comrades. Solestar turned right on passing through the cutout, staring into the crumbling walls bathed in yellow light. The walls gurgled with water despite the wind, and they kept the tunnel tolerably cold. The gray-stone floor was dry, the salty scents evaporated. When Solestar could turn right, she did so into the long tunnel wide enough for monsters. The yellow twoleg lights were buzzing and flickering from the weather. All the smaller dens evenly lining both sides of the walls were still emptied out. Blackleaf stood in front of the one she used to frequent, tail down and ears alert. Both could feel the wind blowing from the far end of the tunnel. Solestar clenched her eyes shut, refusing to make a sound as she gritted her teeth and let a wave of pain wash past her. She looked down; her broken claws were already blackening from frostbite, the paws becoming swollen, bruised flesh limiting them to bending and walking. The blood she never tended to froze to her fur.

"Blackleaf," Solestar whispered.

The young cat turned around.

Blackleaf's ears flattened. Solestar could not hide her panting, her quiet grunts, or her tired eyes. The gash on her nose had blackened. Her knees were bent out of posture. She took deep breathes to calm herself. But she moved back towards the cutout leading to the medicine den. Blackleaf followed. She stayed with her head poking from the side of the cutout, the warriors in the medicine den proper making room for their leader to speak. Her weariness disappeared. Her stride returned and her ears were perked up, the damage all but forgotten.

"Everyone!"

Solestar's voice echoed throughout the medicine den. All were awake to hear it. Only two of the dozen warriors on the back wall were not watching, standing near the entrance and occasionally poking their heads through the fake-fur. The ones near the front were out of their view due to the rubble pile. Many had gathered to the sides of it. Their eyes drifted between her injuries.

"I see what you're looking at," Solestar yelled. "These wounds hurt. I may never recover fully from them. And the Star Covenant has teamed up with UnderClan. You hear the dogs in the distance, too. But make no mistake. We are not beaten."

Some of them began whispering. Even with the wind, the quietest of their mews echoed softly around the medicine den.

"I said *we are not beaten*!"

Solestar's proclamation boomed, drowning out the other voices. The crowd was silent. Not even a cough or scratch from a sickened cat dared disrupt her. The leader's hind claws were sheathed. Her front paws were firm despite their damage. She held her posture straight, even managing to keep her muscles bulging.

"This clan has endured worse," she said. "During the Great Sky War, we watched our leaders die, one by one, until only I remained. I was young, without ceremony or objective. Against the sky-monster lightning strikes, the fighting across the twolegplace, the tigers

rolling over everything in their path, and the raids from cats on the other side of the river, I was able to stand strong. That's because of my comrades. Many of them did not survive the twoleg war. Many of you are their litters. You are the toms and she-cats that stand to finish the jobs your mothers and fathers started. Or your littermates, or lifelong friends. No matter who you are or where you came from, you are a Shadow. You help me stand strong. You help each other stand strong."

The audience began mewing in agreement, lifting their ears and tails.

"And even with outsider help, UnderClan's numbers *still* pale against ours. Their losses at the bridge are nothing to celebrate. Just because they pushed us back here. This petty siege is an excuse to give them time to rest and gain favorable ground. But we have warriors *everywhere*. UnderClan has no idea where and how to strike our territory. They *needed* their spies to return, and none did! Even losing a medicine cat with them. We now control the Covenant enclave. We still have the advantage... But I see your eyes still looking at my injuries. Like I said, they hurt and I may never see my front claws again. It stings so bad I just want to stop fighting and pass out. These injuries, though, come with a great reward. I have delivered a blow to Clementstar he may never recover from. And, after that, I struck down that demon false prophet herself. You hear me correctly: Rye of the Star Covenant is dead!"

Many of them cheered and mewed, waving their tails and unsheathing their claws. A shiver went down Blackleaf's spine when she saw her leader stand a bit prouder at her words.

"I know many of you had your suspicions of her supposed powers, but that doesn't matter now. I am tired, weary, in excruciating pain. But it was all worth it to bite the heads off the clans of those flea-bitten badgers! Now the rest come. And we are waiting for them. It has been many, *many* moons coming. Help me end it... Our siege begins with this pack. One or two of them will be just outside this den, soon. Each we kill is one less path to victory for them. Each one we kill shows just how flawed Clementstar's tactics are. If their leaders couldn't stop me, if these dogs can't stop you, who can!? The Clan of False Shadows will claim victory, our *rightful* victory! All of

us!"

Some of the healthy warriors leapt into the air yelping. Others already started gathering by the entrance. All were eager. Many glanced at the seniors for orders and positions. Even then, some still cheered and chanted Solestar's name. Blackleaf's ears flattened. She watched a frail she-cat helped to her paws by another warrior. When her fake-fur wraps slid off, most of her real fur was missing. Another, an older tom, was barely able to keep steady with the wraps covering all of his paws. They were still stained red. But he directed cats with his tail, keeping his legs still. Blackleaf took a few steps back before returning to the large hall and waiting under a flickering light. The walls began to hum as water pumped through them, drowning out much of the noise in the medicine den proper. The hall warmed slightly. Her heartbeat thumped against her chest. She could not shake the fowl scent of the medicine den from her nose. Solestar was behind her. Her posture had slumped again, against the pain of new blood squishing out of her blackening paws. Her eyes were sharp and her teeth were gritted. It did not stop her from approaching.

"What did you see in there, Blackleaf?" Solestar was panting, her paws dragging across the stone. "What did you see among that crowd?"

Blackleaf stared at the floor. She saw her claws shoot from their sheaths. Her heartbeat never grew any calmer. She felt the blood in her head swell and her tail flick about behind her. She gritted her teeth and glared at her leader. For a brief moment, Blackleaf saw red in her eyes. Even when they snapped back to green, the anger on Solestar's face never vanished. The young cat took a step closer.

"You know what I saw?" Blackleaf growled. "I saw you *condemn* a group of sick and injured warriors."

"What!?" Solestar hissed.

"I saw cats barely able to stand or lead forced to fight a dog. My littermate was healthy and strong and... it tore him apart. I don't even know if he's alive right now! You would ask *that* of your comrades!?"

"Don't you *dare* question my leadership. You don't have the right—" Solestar smacked Blackleaf across the face and jammed her paw into her chest. "—Not after you left me. Not after all you've done."

Blackleaf staggered to her paws. "I wanted to give them something to believe in. Something that tells them their lives don't all revolve around that bridge and who crosses it!"

"You never cared about the war, I know." Solestar leaned close, her size baring down onto Blackleaf. "But you didn't care about the plight of our comrades, either. You didn't care about their hopes, their fears, or their sorrows. You just wanted to bring StarClan back."

"I wanted them to have faith—"

Solestar smacked her again, distancing herself.

"Faith in what!? The night sky or each other? Because one wasn't there!"

Solestar hit her again. Blood spots were left in Blackleaf's fur from each hit with her front paws. She began to pant again, crying out against the pain her broken claws caused. Blackleaf tried scrambling away, but Solestar closed the distance and struck with her hind legs instead.

"You're acting like everything they've been through is for nothing," Solestar hissed. "These warriors have lacerations across their chests. Some are blind in an eye or deaf in an ear. Some have blackcough. Boils on the side of their bellies under their fur. They burst, Blackleaf. They bleed!"

"I know what blackcough does to a cat," Blackleaf hissed."

"*Do* you!? Because if you did, you would've done more than leave them to fate in a dreary, gray-stone den."

"You gave me permission to do this. Don't act like you're blameless."

"I wanted you to succeed. I wanted you to become the hope this clan needed. I watched you fail to report weaknesses in our

backlands, and help an under cat off our territory, and *run away* from all of us! You even let that useless old badger of an Axin Mess survivor—"

"Do *not* insult Wolfgang! You took him away from me, and from his friends. He deserved more than you could ever give him."

"And what did you give him? Sympathy when he clutches his past and rejects his adopted clan? A high-ranking cat to tell him his behavior was okay...? Something warm to jam himself into on a lonely leafbare night?"

Blackleaf hissed and lunged at Solestar. She dodged the first swipe, grunting against her damaged paws, and slammed the young she-cat away with her hind legs. Before she could stand, Solestar pounced onto Blackleaf and rolled her onto her back. She cried out at putting pressure on her bleeding, broken claws. Her eyes were narrow, forced with anger. Blackleaf saw her shaking legs and her twitching ears. Every time She grunted or mewed, a touch of her own anger disappeared. Blackleaf pushed her front paw against the leader's thick chest fur; her heart pounded underneath.

"My heart beats for my comrades and my clan, and all who've died to preserve everything we have," Solestar growled, leaning close. "I believed yours was the same. Do you have any idea what it was like hearing them demand your head, or worse? How much pain it brought us all to see you devolve like this?"

"I wanted to help my comrades," Blackleaf said. "I saw them hurting on the inside. I saw them losing hope. They needed something!"

"I love you Blackleaf. Like you're my own kin. And you betrayed us."

"You betrayed StarClan—"

"You betrayed your living comrades!"

Solestar smashed her bloody paws into Blackleaf's neck.

"And you gave yourself to that UnderClan medicine cat!"

She kept smacking the young cat, who tried blocking the blows. Solestar kept a paw just below her neck, forcing Blackleaf to try and pull it away. Her hind leg still smashed into her belly.

"Your littermate was concerned for you, and you ignored him!"

She continued hitting Blackleaf. She smashed her paw into her muzzle, pinning her head to its side and forcing her to look up with just one wide, pink-colored eye.

"And now your comrades detest you and you leave us. Twice! Who knows what would've happened if you'd just helped us from the start? If you just told me anything!"

Blackleaf's mumbles were muffled under the weight of Solestar's front paws. She was forced to taste the dirty blood covering the broken, swollen paws. Blackleaf closed her eyes, but they were forced open by another swift kick to her belly. But Solestar let up the pressure just a bit, pushing her forehead gently into the young cat's chest.

"When did I lose my Blackpaw? What did I do wrong to you?"

Blackleaf's heart skipped a beat at her leader's words. Solestar's paw slid away from her muzzle, leaving it stained with her blood. Blackleaf looked at the older cat heaving into her chest.

"Please, Blackleaf." Solestar's voice was muffled. "What did I do—"

"Haaaaaail, Shadow cats!"

The howl echoed past the medicine den and throughout the tunnel. Solestar froze, her paws shaking again. All the noise from the medicine den ceased.

"My name's Dona. This is Karin... I mean, you can't see her, or me, but we're both here! Right in front of your medicine den. I promise! Anyway, I have good intel there's a certain she-cat in there Heidi wants to see right now. So, if the rest of you put your sharp claws away, we can do this the easy way. And after that, we can all have fun. We can even invite UnderClan over and have a mossball game! I mean, there's no moss since it's winter. But it sounds like..."

"She..." Solestar got off Blackleaf and took a few steps away. "She wasn't supposed to make it this far."

"... I like the drapes here over your bunker to keep you all nice and cozy. And that's why I think you should surrender," Dona continued barking. "We already have another going around back to take Solestar by force. He's tough, but there's a lot of cats topside. Seriously, it was such a good idea to use a bunker for a den. Who thinks of that? I don't know how to get in without Karin. See, I don't like claws. Or being scratched. At least, not by claws. And UnderClan's not joining us. I wouldn't want them to get blackcough, anyway. So I brought Karin! She knows how to deal with cats and claws and stuff. There's this really nasty word the masters used to command us. Karin doesn't like hearing it. But when she does—"

"Please, Dona, just shut up!" Another voice shouted. "Everyone out, single file, or you're all dead!" The second's voice was breaking.

"They want to kill me," Solestar whispered. "She wants me dead."

"Aww, Karin's not as much fun as me," Dona said.

"Solestar, just give up!" Karin barked. "For everything you've done to Heidi, I want to kill you myself. Don't make me go through all of them."

"No, silly, that's Wolfgang's job. We're here to—"

"Oh my God, Dona, please!" Karin growled.

Solestar looked down at her paws. The bits of blood her flexing muscles squeezed from the tips of her broken paws ran down the swollen skin and into the wet prints her paws left. She put one to her nose and gagged. Blackleaf stood close, her long tail wrapping itself around Solestar's leg. Each time she tried pulling away, the young cat kept close. A growl ruined her posture. Both turned around to see the dark shadow move into the light and bare fangs larger than their muzzles. The massive dog's thick fur covered its profile. They could not back away fast enough; they did not even try. Under the yellow lights its eyes were two black dots, fixed on the older she-cat. Massive claws scratched above the ambient

mechanisms as it approached. It's brown and black coat made it impossible to see whenever the lights flickered off. It was unphased by the momentary losses of light. It bore its rows of teeth, a long tree-length from them and closing.

"Well, I don't see you coming out single file," Dona yelled. "And I couldn't hear Wolfgang back there even if I wanted to. Sorry, everyone. Looks like Karin's going in, after all."

Wolfgang growled at the pair; they lurched back even more.

"I won't be getting an answer from Wolfgang unless he brings Solestar through the front here, or goes out the back," Dona yelled. "Or he could use the escape tunnel leading out of the bunker. Wait, no. He used it to get in. Of course he'd go that way! But I wouldn't know if he got Solestar, then. Not if I send Karin in right now. Maybe I can give him a few minutes. You hear that, Wolfgang!? A few minutes to—"

"No!" Karin roared. "Right now! Just say the damn word, already!"

Wolfgang growled, a mere fox-length from the pair and looming over them. Even amidst the fickle lights and his black muzzle, they could make out the red ring around his lips and inside his mouth. His fur reeked of blood, as well, not a spec of snow to be seen. His paws were wet with it, too.

"Solestar!" A warrior poked through the cutout. "Let us—"

"Get back to your positions and subdue the attacking pair!" Solestar shouted, not taking her eyes from Wolfgang. "Defend them. Don't worry about me."

He disappeared. Blackleaf broke from Solestar and distanced herself from both. Her heart raced as she sprinted towards the cutout, stopping in front of it and in full view of the medicine den.

"Karin, *fass, fass*!"

Blackleaf heard the fake-fur blocking the entrance unpinned as the rock tumbled down the ramp. The shuffle of cats appeared from the rubble pile in the center obstructing her view. The hisses of the

Shadow warriors overwhelmed the gusts of wind and scraping of Solestar's claws behind her. Their formation blocked the ramp and both sides of the den. Some were already faltering, though. One flew through the air on the left side and struck a light, popping off sparks and extinguishing it. The victim did not even mew when they hit the ground. A scream, another tossed to the left, smacking the wall and leaving red where it hit. More faltered and backed away from the right side.

"Break formation!" one of the senior warriors hissed. "Overwhelm it!"

All charged and cried out. Karin's barking did not break them. But it did not stop two of the frontrunners from being tossed aside. Blackleaf's paws shook, not daring to set one through the cutout. Her fur spiked at the scent of blood drifting from the walls. Karin came into her view, pushing several out of the way on the left side. The mass of cats covering her quickly faltered. She tore one from her leg and dropped it. Two were shaken from her neck, one smacking the wall. She picked off the other and dropped it. Both fell limp. Two more were shaken from her neck. Karin charged the wall shoulder-first. A small yelp from one pinned between both and nothing from the others; two fell, unmoving, to the floor. She thrashed and kicked her hind legs. More flew into the wall behind her. Another was crushed under her paw. Karin growled, lifting her paw and crushing the skull of the one beneath her. The sick warriors in the back gasped as her paw crunched out and slapped against the floor, covered pink and red. She roared; the ones remaining in front leapt at her. She slashed through the air, the blood splattering the wall next to her. All fell dead. She bent her head down and clasped a body. She tossed it to the back; a sick cat desperately tried to catch it. Her eyes were wide when she noticed cats coming from the right and block the entrance, surrounding her. In the remaining light, her muzzle was deeply stained red. She kicked behind her, crushing the eye of a warrior. Before he could cry out, she kicked again. He dropped to the floor. The rest leapt at her. She jumped into the air and spun. Most deflected off her. Those who did not were picked from her side like fleas and crushed in her jaws. Each body she dropped strengthened the scent of blood. It sprayed across the walls. Bile and dirt remained of the dying.

Blackleaf did not dare gaze at their corpses. With the warriors broken, Karin focused on the sick cats in the back of the den. They formed up, some still unable to stand. Blackleaf saw the black spots beneath some of their fur. And the scars that still leaked pus and drops of blood, punctured from stretching their skin too fast. Their heads were low, and their tails made no movements. When one turned around, she saw the tan dribble leaking from its half-open muzzle. But it was angry. It returned to the war dog and hissed. Karin leaned down and licked some of the gore from her paw. She growled and stepped on the bodies in her way. Each snap, and crunch, and twist the fallen cats made under her large paws angered the Shadows more. Their strength slowly returned. They were ready. Karin leapt; they did, too. Several fell immediately. The dog caught two by their fake-fur wraps and dropped them under her paw. She crushed them like so many others. The hisses were disjointed. The barking drowned out everything. Blackleaf's tail was tight around her leg. She stepped away from the terror and back into the deeper medicine den.

"Let go of me!"

Blackleaf tore her eyes from the blood-scented cutout and ran back to the large tunnel. Wolfgang had Solestar lifted in his paw, slamming her to the ground and beating her. He arched his paws to pinch the skin around her ribs each time he pressed down. She tried lifting herself; he smacked her against the gray-stone floor each time. She rolled off her back and tried to stand; he smashed her under his weight. Her head hit the floor each time he pressed down. Her back began to bleed, two massive slashes running down it. Solestar moaned against the dog's weight whenever she tried to push herself up. She fought to keep her eyes from crossing. Blood began pooling underneath her, staining the white in her fur. Wolfgang leaned close and growled whenever Solestar made so much as a whimper.

"Let her go..." Blackleaf was paralyzed by the look in the dog's eye.

Solestar barely moved when Wolfgang finally let her hobble to her paws. Wolfgang knocked her down and onto her side. He pressed his weight onto one of her front paws. Blood shot from her broken claws and her shrieking overpowered the fighting in the medicine

den. Her sharp fur never settled. She rolled away from the dog and failed to clench her jaw shut several times. Solestar dragged herself towards Blackleaf. Their eyes met. Wolfgang let her get a fox-length away before snapping her up in his jaws and throwing her into a wall; A small smack of blood remained from the impact. Solestar's breathing grew heavy, but she managed to stand up when Wolfagang calmly gave her space. Blackleaf finally summoned the courage to approach. Wolfgang watched her rest a paw on Solestar's broken one. She groaned, but looked at the young she-cat. Blackleaf felt her heartbeat pound against her chest. It took everything to ignore the dog's snarl above her head. One green eye of her former leader gazed upon her, the other popped and leaking blood. When she opened her mouth, Wolfgang stomped on her lower back, rolled her over, and slammed his paw between her hind legs. It was too much; Her muzzle locked open and loosed a cry that broke Blackleaf's shaky composure. The young cat's ears were pinned to the back of her head. When he tore his paw away, it was soaked red. He nodded.

"Stop!" Solestar cried. "Don't kill me like this! Not in front of her!"

The Shadow leader rolled to her side, pinning her hind legs together and leaving her front ones limp. Her breathing was quick and heavy. Blood was dripping from her ears as well. A new pool of it soaked into her fur. Blackleaf rested a paw on her side, feeling Solestar's heart pound against it. She pulled it off when she accidently ran over a broken rib and made her grunt.

"Let me speak to her. Please." Solestar's voice was breaking.

Wolfgang rested his paw atop the Shadow leader's head.

"Please!" Solestar mewed.

The dog pushed her head to face Blackleaf. She struggled to keep her remaining eye open against the pain in her legs. The young cat kept her paw on Solestar's.

"Fitting I'm killed by a mutt named Wolfgang." Her voice became softer.

"I'm here, Solestar," Blackleaf whispered. The scent of her blood curled her nose, but she did not pull away. "I'm still here. I'm still..." She collapsed to the floor and bowed her head. "*I'm sorry*!"

Solestar's eye widened.

"I... I finally saw StarClan, Solestar. I believe it was them. A she-cat named Reiz. A dream—yes, the dream! I dreamt of you, all of you. You, Flyfoot, Fleetheart, Leaftail. You were all so angry with me. StarClan told me I failed. But Littlestar came. She told me not to give up on myself... She told me..."

"Don't stop," Solestar groaned. "I have to know."

"She... told me not to give up on myself. She said as long as I had my goal, and my life, I had not failed. But, how can I believe that? When I see you, when I hear them suffer, I can't just tell myself it isn't over for the clan... my Stars, I'm so sorry—"

"You can't apologize for this," Solestar whispered. "It *is* over for me. Don't let it be so for them."

"But I can't do that without you, Solestar!" Blackleaf yelled, gently pressing her head against her paw. "I need you. I'm so sorry! I just wanted everyone to see the Stars. I didn't want to lose them like I'd lost you, or Leaftail, or Flyfoot. I wanted them to be happy. I didn't mean for any of this to happen, Solestar... Solestar!?"

Blackleaf lifted her head. The Shadow leader focused on just breathing. Wolfgang nodded and rolled her head flat against the ground. Solestar groaned when her body followed, laying flat on her belly. Her shattered limbs were pressed under her broken ribs. She tried crying out, but the weight of the dog's paw on her head clenched her jaw shut. He glared at Blackleaf; she did not dare step away from her leader. His fur began to spike. His nostrils flared. Wolfgang pushed down on her head. Solestar grit her teeth at first. He pressed harder. Her bobbed tail twitched, and she grunted. His leg flexed as he put his weight into it. Her jaw bent open and let out a scream that scared Blackleaf off. Even Wolfgang pressed his ears flat. Blackleaf could not take her eyes off it. Solestar's last good eye was crushed under a massive claw. His paw pressed enough into her

head to start sinking in. Her open mouth was missing fangs and sprayed blood. As her head flattened, her tongue shot further out than it could on its own. Her screaming only grew louder. The blood only pooled faster. He did not let up, even when cracks echoed from her head. He pressed harder. The top was flat. Blackleaf hissed and leapt onto the war dog's muzzle. A quick snap of his jaw; she was trapped and tossed aside against a wall. She yelped when landing on a rock. When she stood, her eyes widened. The top of Solestar's head was collapsed into the back of her muzzle. She stopped screaming. Her mouth was locked open and choking on her own gore.

"Solestar?" Blackleaf whispered.

No response.

"Solestar please!"

Wolfgang lifted his paw, relaxing it to loosen the Shadow leader's head from its grasp.

"I just wanted us to see the Stars! I wanted you back..."

Blackleaf tried moving her legs forward, but could not. Solestar lay flat, her head still leaking. She could smell everything pushed out from inside her. She refused to curl her nose. Her once-green eyes were crushed, two red slits dripping blood remaining. There were no brown or orange spots, or white fur. Every hair on her was red. Wolfgang nodded and picked up the she-cat's body in his jaws.

"You can't have her."

Wolfgang turned towards Blackleaf.

"Bring her back. She won't... make it to StarClan."

He glared at her, clenching the body tighter.

"Then take me too!"

His eyes softened up.

"My dream can't be right! I don't want to live with it!"

He shook his head.

"Littlestar was wrong. She had to be. This can't be happening!"

His eyes narrowed, strength returning to his jaw. He shook his head, again. Blackleaf's ears folded back. When Wolfgang walked towards the cutout, she shakenly followed Solestar's body. When he slowed his pace, she did. He stopped, lifting his floppy ear for a moment. Blackleaf's perked up; there was silence in the medicine den. Except for the faintest whimpers, there was not a hint of a cat's presence. It was quiet enough to hear the flickering of the light she witnessed being shattered. The fowl scent wafting from the cutout curled her nose. Her fur crept on end. Wolfgang angled Solestar's body so it would not hit the walls on his way in.

"Is the albino still alive?" she heard Dona whisper.

A few heartbeats of silence passed.

"Okay. I guess—oh no, no! It's okay, Karin. It's okay."

More whimpering from the medicine den. She took a deep breath and poked her head through the cutout, pulling it back and gagging. She shook out her fur. Her eyes were jammed shut. But she forced them open and walked through the cutout all the way. Even the remaining lights were enough to show the carnage. Most were gathered along the left wall, between it and the debris pile. Snow was still falling from the pitch-black sky. When it fell through the hole in the ceiling, released from the force of the wind, it melted on touching the blood-laced floor. A few steps in, Blackleaf's paws were already covered in it. Most of it was still warm and laced with sticky hairs of all colors. She passed the first one in her way. The scent of it hit harder. His back was punctured in three spots. Fur held back much of the blood, but she could not see how deep his wounds went. Another had a massive dent where its lower back would normally rest, tail and hips caved in. she smelled the black flesh that riddled the cat's skin. There were wraps around her broken legs, pinned underneath her. Blackleaf reached the first clear spot on the floor and gagged. What little bile came up seeped

into the cracks and mixed with the blood. She watched the mixture turn brown, reeking like dirt. She spun around; nothing moved. Dona broke from Karin and closed the medicine den's fake-fur covers, pinning them under the rock to keep them still in the wind. Karin stood and followed. Her fur was so laced with blood it sagged and dripped from the tufts on her belly. The corners of her mouth were covered in the pinkish gore of the den's occupants. She did not even shake it off. Everything but her legs was limp. She and Dona left the medicine den, Wolfgang already gone. Karin took one last look at the lone medicine cat. Her eyes were invisible from her blood-soaked face.

"Almost forgot!" Pep returned to Dona's voice. "Heidi told me to return these here."

She tossed something inside the den before leaving for good. Blackleaf's eyes widened when she approached the object; her dark green medicine vest. She sniffed it. It still barely had an odor. She pressed down on them. Nothing came out. They were only as wet as the melting snow made them. Blackleaf found herself on a blood-less pouch. She carefully slipped the vest over her shoulders and barely could tightened the strap between her hind legs. The vest was cold and loose, but she did not care. White stars began dotting her vision. She looked up through the hole in the ceiling. The sky was dark, and snow still blew in and across the den's roof. The gray-stone closed in on the sides of her view. Blackleaf let herself hit the ground and rolled onto her side best she could, whispering to herself. She could not close her eyes. They were fixed on the night sky, praying the clouds would break.

Chapter 49

The blackbirds' cawing woke her this time. She stirred a bit and tried to ignore it, but the scent of blood hit her again. It lost some of its potency, much of it diluted by gusts of wind and blown away by what liquid lingered. She sighed and raised her head; she was still surrounded by carrion. So, she rested it back on her paws and closed her eyes. Her ears swiveled in the direction of the blackbirds. They were perched around the hole in the ceiling of the medicine den. There were only a few, and they kept their distance. They watched her carefully. She flicked her ears to remind them she was awake. The carcass of one lay nearby, killed and eaten. Aside from them, she heard nothing. The sun was not yet at its highest. The wind calmed to a mild draft. But there was snow inside the den. The massive fake-fur once covering the entrance to the den blew from its pinning at some point. It lay just in front of the entrance. Fresh air was cycling through, slowly taking the scent of death from the den. Snow nearly covered the tall pile of rubble in the center. The weight of it even broke some pieces off. It also covered most of the bodies. What warmth it held was gone. Her long, once-white tail was curled around her, in view. It made no moves when she glanced at it. She pulled it close, stroking it. Her eyes rolled to the entrance, as did her ears. The blackbirds flapped away, cawing louder than before as they distanced themselves from their perch. A trio of cats climbed over the fallen fake-fur covers and stood in the entrance. The light from the morning sun made her squint when looking at them.

"You must be Blackleaf." The old one in the center spoke low, his voice absorbed inside.

"What do you want?" Blackleaf growled, baring her fangs.

"It is over. You must leave this place."

She narrowed her eyes.

"The last command from my Prophet was to ensure your safety. It

was her most important goal."

Blackleaf's ears perked up. "You aren't UnderClan."

"No," he said. "And I agree with our elite warrior-rah that it is time to retrieve you. The fighting has stopped. The last of the Clan of False Shadows have surrendered."

"Oh..." Blackleaf clenched her tail harder.

"A dog by the name of Dona told me you may still be here, and we knew no cat would dare set paw inside due to the blackcough. Still, I did not expect you to be left alone for two days—"

"Two days!?"

"Yes, if we count the evening Solestar withdrew from the bridge and began this siege. The storm only broke at dawn, and it destroyed all the twoleg lights. For you, perhaps, time would be hard to tell in here. But it has, indeed, been two days since the start of the battle."

"So... it's really over?"

"Yes." The tom hesitated, looking around. "You know, this place of disea... this den is not suited for you to stay forever."

"I've been eating. And I must stand vigil for them."

"From my understanding of cat clan traditions, vigil only lasts the night after death."

Blackleaf took a deep breath, curling herself tighter. He squinted, one of the cats at his side whispering in his ear. He nodded.

"My name is Kritz, herald of this Star Covenant branch. I stand, until my death and beyond, for our magnanimous Rye Incarnate, may she rest eternally in the suns of silverpelt. I wish you to see this ordeal to its conclusion, for fear our Prophet may return to our branch unfulfilled. Oh, and leave your vest here. It... holds this fowl place's scent."

Blackleaf's ears fell hearing her name. She turned to look at the

room of bodies one more time. The snow made them hard to tell apart. Lifting herself slowly, she stretched to break the dry blood that bound some of her hairs together. She slowly removed her medicine vest, also covered with the same mess. As she went up the ramp, Kritz backed away to let her pass. When she left the medicine den, the two warrior-rah walked a fox-length on each side of her. She squinted until her eyes were in focus. The camp's clearing was full of activity, but quiet. There were dozens of foreign warriors walking about. The fresh-kill piles had been emptied, small rodents remaining. On the raised platform in front of the warrior's and leader's nests lay the bodies. Some rows were already covered by the falling snow. Others were still being added evenly to each. Most of the bodies lacked blood, or at least had injuries under their fur. Blackleaf's nose curled at the scent of camp. Each gust of wind blew it away, but it always lingered in the back of her throat. The rows covered most of the platform and extended the length of it. She could not tell anyone apart, Shadows or UnderClan. Her head was low when one of those tending to the dead looked at her. Others did as well. She avoided their gazes and continued following Kritz.

"It may bring you comfort to know some of your allies fled," Kritz said. "Eventually, they will sort who is UnderClan and who is Shadow. Star Covenant dead have all been accounted for."

"How many?" Blackleaf mumbled.

"Fifteen Covenant dead, including our Prophet. Over a hundred for the Shadows. UnderClan counts are nearly identical, comparatively losing the most. But we have not retrieved the dead from the backlands. Shadow territory is vast."

Blackleaf recognized one of the cats near the rows; Fleetheart's gray and white fur was lightly covered in red, but she was moving just fine. She did not seem to notice the young cat, despite the others occasionally staring.

"Solestar was killed in the medicine den, from what I was told," Kritz said, "by one of the war dogs, Wolfgang. The body was a grewsome sight. But that did not stop him from parading it to the leader's den. Miraculously, against the storm winds, part of the second floor collapsed. It forced those inside to fall back to the

warrior's den or the backlands. Others fled at the mere sight of their leader's body. Leadership fell to your medicine cats, Fleetheart and Flyfoot, who persuaded the holdouts in the den to surrender peacefully. The backlands saw the most violence. It took a whole day and night to secure from Shadow holdouts. Some even managed to go underground and attack UnderClan's deep patrols again. Those specific efforts proved suicidal... To be driven to such a desperate act."

The four cats moved past the raised platform and in front of several piles of snow. There was a pair of dead cats resting in its base the others had not yet picked up. But next to them, on the side of the short stone wall marking camp boundaries, was a pair talking with one of the dogs. Her heart pounded faster; she recognized Flyfoot immediately. Another cat was shrouded by a large fake-fur blanket covering him. His nearly bald muzzle gave him away, though. Burn was shivering, the war dog standing close to him. Blackleaf's fur spiked when she saw the large scar running from her head to her hind legs. It was Heidi. Her claws did not even unsheathe, though. And her fur settled the closer she got. The dog's fur was covered in dried blood, and it reeked the same as the medicine den. She spotted the approaching four and faced them, as did Burn and Flyfoot; the wildcat ran to Blackleaf and wrapped herself around her.

"I, um..." Blackleaf felt the wildcat's heartbeat, too.

"Just as you thought, Flyfoot, she was in the medicine den the whole time," Kritz said. The warrior-rah returned to his side. "There are no other survivors in there."

"I'd expect nothing less from Karin," Heidi said. "I hate that it came to that."

Flyfoot's neck fur bristled. "You slaughter them cold blood."

"It was *not* cold blood," Heidi snapped. "Every loyal Shadow deserved—" She glanced at Blackleaf, whose head was still resting against the wildcat's shoulder. "It... wasn't cold blood."

Fleetheart walked over to the group. She was not wearing her

medicine vest; Blackleaf could easier see the scars across the thinner parts of her fur. Flyfoot let the young cat go. Kritz motioned the two warrior-rah away. Blackleaf watched them disappear behind one of the piles of snow. He backed away from the group until he was out of earshot, keeping an eye on them. Flyfoot's ears swiveled in his direction for a while.

"Hate way he watch us," Flyfoot growled.

"It's important to his faith," Fleetheart said. "I understand, even if I don't agree."

"Diseased little kit more plague to us than blackcough," the wildcat spat. "Still, she better than Solestar. Wolfgang deserve his revenge from silverpelt."

The group's attention slowly turned to the young cat. Fleetheart moved next to the others and kept her eyes on the rows of bodies. Blackleaf hardly noticed them before: dozens of pairs of eyes. Some were narrowed with borne fangs underneath. Many just stared at her, though. The cats tending to the dead were also looking at her, but only briefly. She searched whoever her eyes came across, but not one bore the 'X' marking of her clan. She shook her head out, but the view did not change. Her tail flicked about and eventually settle around her own leg. Only when she glanced between each of them did she turn back towards the group. She focused on Heidi.

"What did you do to my littermate?" Blackleaf tried to growl.

Heidi looked away. "Paralyzed from the neck down, I'm told. He was being tended to by Flyfoot in the warrior's den before they surrendered. He's holding on, but—"

"Why'd you have to do that to him?" Blackleaf's voice was breaking.

"I had no idea who he was until you shouted his name. Even so, Rye only requested I spare you. I had no intention of doing the same to anyone else."

Briefly, Blackleaf's claws unsheathed. Her fur spiked when she looked into the dog's large, brown eyes. But it quickly faded. The

energy drained from her body. She hung her head again. All but her attention diverted to an approaching pair; Flyfoot ran up to the large wildcat tom and embraced him.

"Molenose!" she yelled.

"I let go by Clementstar," Molenose said. "Glad to see you alive."

The other, a white she-cat with blue eyes, dragged her tail carelessly through the snow. Her ears perked up when she spotted the young cat.

"Blackleaf?" she said.

She did not respond, or look up.

"It's me, Angelika..."

Still no response.

"She's been through a lot," Fleetheart said.

"Oh..." Angelika's ears dropped. "Well, I was told Clementstar wanted to see her the moment she was found."

"Is he still in the Shadow's sacred spot?" Burn grunted.

Angelika nodded.

"I'll stay here and oversee the clearing. Fleetheart and Flyfoot should go with her."

"I'll go, too," Heidi said. "I want to check on Juta again, anyway."

After some coaxing from Angelika, Blackleaf walked slowly behind her. She did not even shake the snow from her fur. Kritz kept his distance, but followed.

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What few snowflakes there were gently flew through the holes in the ceiling without a hint of wind to disturb them. The single-nosed sky-monster in the center of the den did not glisten, nor did any morning light bounce from its surface. It was scratched rough by the storm. The whole of the floor was covered in specs of snow, the bulk of it having already melted away. It managed to retain its warmth, somehow. The den was full but not crowded. Clementstar was in the center, right in front of the sky-monster. Much of his tan fur was wrapped in clean fake-fur. The black parts of his muzzle and paws were also clean of any dried blood. His neck was wrapped extra, and he barely moved his head when Blackleaf and the others walked in. Only Fleetheart and Flyfoot followed; Kritz waited outside. The UnderClan leader was flanked by a pair of dogs and several warriors scattered about. Heidi had gone ahead and was sitting close to another. The other was wearing a large, hide vest covering most of her body. She sat perfectly straight and tried swaying as little as possible. The third was Karin. She was clean of blood, and brown returned to her eyes. Blackleaf shuttered and kept her distance from all three. Her fur was on end, her tail swayed about. Flyfoot sat close.

"We meet again, Blackleaf." Clementstar's voice was muffled by his stiffened neck. "You've probably met Heidi. The one with the vest is Juta, and the third is Karin."

Blackleaf kept her head down, avoiding the glares of the scattered UnderClan warriors.

Clementstar yawned carefully. "First, Flyfoot and Fleetheart, you two have been given time. Do you agree to the surrender terms I've set?"

Flyfoot narrowed her eyes. "You not give us choice."

"Not you two, no. We need you. But everything else?"

The wildcat growled. "One thing I not agree."

"Flyfoot," Fleetheart said. "We talked about this—"

"That before I see her. She in no condition for this."

"But, we can't—"

"I make case for her *now*!" The war dogs shifted at her hiss. "Clementstar too cruel."

"And Solestar wasn't?" Heidi growled.

"She dead. She not matter anymore."

"Of course she does," Heidi said. "She's the whole reason we have these terms. Aren't you angry she killed Wolfgang?"

"Course I am." Flyfoot saw Fleetheart's ears drop. "She dead now. Not let her affect Clementstar decision."

"It's because of her we have to do this," Clementstar interrupted, clearing his throat. "I'm sorry, you two. I don't think you'll change my mind otherwise."

Flyfoot's ears were still sharp. Heidi calmed, though, on glancing at Juta.

"Tell me everything," Blackleaf mumbled.

Juta sharpened her posture. "The surrender was unconditional, once the backlands were cleared. The Clan of False Shadows is to be dissolved. Its surviving members are being given a choice to serve UnderClan or face banishment. Few have chosen to stay. Fleetheart and Flyfoot are to replace UnderClan's lost medicine cats until new ones are trained and of age. They can do whatever they want after. Kritz is still negotiating on behalf of the Star Covenant, but it seems they will be granted access to their old enclave to ward off the members they sent for on Rye's birth. When that's done, they'll leave to avoid conflict with clan cats. Five warrior-rah will stay, four of them she-cats to help repopulate UnderClan. They want to keep Rye's story alive for animals in this region, God rest her soul. Something about their traditions. Can't blame them. Solestar deserved worse for what she did to the poor she-kit."

"So then... I have to help UnderClan cats, too?" Blackleaf mewed.

Flyfoot and Fleetheart looked away. Juta relaxed, leaning on Heidi.

Clementstar cleared his throat.

"Not exactly," he said. "You're being banished."

"*What*!?"

"It's for your own good."

"Don't tell me what's good for me and what isn't!"

Fleetheart rested a paw on Blackleaf's shoulder.

"Blackleaf—"

"No, Fleetheart, no! I don't want to leave."

"You aren't being given a choice. The Star Covenant will help make this easier for you. Kritz has agreed to this as well, for your safety."

"*We* not agree to it," Flyfoot growled, forcing Fleetheart's head up.

"I know," Clementstar sighed. "I didn't want to bring this up because you were so concerned about her whereabouts, but you need to understand she isn't safe here."

"She not deserve this. Actions come from genuine place."

"That's not good enough." The UnderClan leader cleared his throat. "From what we learned throughout this whole thing, she had quite a bad reputation in your clan. Even her own kin had trouble speaking to her. Even you argued with her, constantly."

"That not matter."

"She angered Windstripe enough to throw herself into a rage-induced charge to try and kill her. The Axin Mess survivors of our clan revered Windstripe and blamed her death on the poor morals and judgement of Blackleaf."

"She rescues Angelika. She not corrupt!"

"True, but she also let our captured medicine cat, Dovewhisker, into this sacred spot of yours. And never mentioned she was a medicine

cat—which I can only assume Dovewhisker would've told her. She was hated enough to be harassed by her own clanmates, explaining the bruises and scars she had when she fled."

"Fleetheart learn that captive medicine cat sooner, and never tell."

"Fleetheart didn't run away. Can't imagine how poor an impression that left on her clanmates. Doubly so since she broke her clan's momentum in a winning battle. And our own still attempted to kill her the moment she set paw on our side of the bridge. I couldn't order them to stop making vulgar threats. And, after all that, she was almost force-mated with on her return. It led to the death of Wolfgang, an Axin Mess survivor known on our side, too. Ours blame his death on Blackleaf, just like with Dovewhisker and Windstripe."

"That Solestar's fault!"

"There's nothing you say that'll convince me to keep her here. I can't trust her to defend herself. She is hated among those of yours who will choose to remain and ours. They won't be able to move past this whole ordeal if one of its catalysts still walks among them. In fact, the only ones who *don't* want her dead are in this den, right now. The Star Covenant has agreed to send her to the closest branch. That's the best she's offered, Flyfoot. I'm sorry."

"No you not. You not know her."

The anger slowly drained from Flyfoot's face, though. Clementstar bundled himself back up, resting his head gently on his forelegs. The wraps around his head loosened a bit, revealing the several large scabs on his forehead. Juta helped tighten them up, careful not to push the charm wrapped around his ankle. Angelika, Flyfoot, and Fleetheart were around Blackleaf, whose tail curled around her paws. She felt her heart pound against her chest again. Her breaths grew deeper; Angelika rested a paw on her back. The nest creaked from the outside from the quick gusts of wind blowing snow form the roof and down the side of the sky-monster. No matter how much light made it into the den, it failed to reflect from its silverwood surface. Blackleaf was fixed on it, her eyes slowly creeping past its finned tail and to the sky. She let the snow gently

fall on her face.

"Blackleaf," Angelika said. "After you rescued me, you said the best way to pray was alone. I wanted your safety. I wanted you to hear from the Stars. Did you?"

The young cat choked up and nodded her head.

"You did!?" Fleetheart's eyes widened. "What did they say? I have to know!"

"I... I saw you. And Flyfoot, and Solestar, and Leaftail. You were all so mad at me. And Littlestar came to tell me not to give up on myself." Her voice began breaking, keeping her head down. "That's it. I prayed for my entire life for those words. And they were about me. My mistakes. On how I was about to be like her. And it came true... All of this... I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Fleetheart said. "The omens of the Stars are delivered where they are needed."

"I killed them," Blackleaf said. "The blood in that medicine den is just as much on me as it is them."

She shut her eyes, pressing hard against Flyfoot's chest. Her tail curled even tighter around her own legs, and she felt herself sliding to the floor. She buried her face in her paws and heaved deep breaths. She wrapped herself around the wildcat's paws. Taken aback, Flyfoot eventually settled and rubbed her shoulders, her cropped tail sliding about. Blackleaf's long tail uncurled from her legs and touched Flyfoot's paws, as well. Fleetheart and Angelika joined in, resting a paw against Blackleaf's back. None seemed to mind the dry blood covering parts of her fur. She tried curling her nose and take in the wildcat's scent instead; it did not work. The rest of the den's occupants were silent, letting the four cats keep their calm embrace. A few blackbirds swooped onto the ceiling and peered inside. They stayed quiet, too. Blackleaf took a deep breath and lifted her head, turning away from everyone.

"Are you going to be okay?" Angelika said.

Blackleaf shook her head.

"No."

Chapter 50

Several cats were arranged in a semi-circle around the center. Some sat. Others lay. But they all were marked with three pink scars on their thighs. Pale moonlight glistened through the holes in the ceiling and off several mirrors on the walls. Much of the light shined back to the center, leaving most of the twoleg den dim. When Blackleaf walked in, the cold draft hardly bothered her. Her medicine vest was in the corner, free of blood and scent and kept away from patches of snow built up from falling through the holes. More floated in from above. The four others following her quickly dispersed to the spots the existing occupants were. They stood, bowed towards the center in unison, and left. Two of the new occupants went to the darkest corners of the den. The other two stayed near the entrance. All four bowed their heads. The den was quiet enough to hear the minor weight shifts and light breathing. But the sound of a fifth walking through the narrow entrance broke the silence for but a moment to approach the she-cat near the body. He put a paw to his gray muzzle before closing his eyes and bowing his head.

"When will she be buried?" Blackleaf said.

"Clementstar has given us permission to use the Shadow's sacred spot," Kritz whispered, lifting his head. "In case the twolegs ever wish to reclaim this part of *berlin*, we will mark her grave with the symbol of their faith. The cross, identical to the one on the charm Clementstar wears. The twolegs will not disturb it, then."

"I don't want to hold you up. I won't be long."

"You are the last of Rye's affairs. You take all the time you need... Though, I suggest you speak to her in silence. That canid outside may relay your words to others."

"I'm sorry, but Clementstar wouldn't make an exception."

"I have no right or power to order him around. The Clan of False

Shadows is destroyed, and you are alive. The missions of our Prophet succeeded and she will be returned to StarClan. That means our mission in this region is done, too."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you if I speak aloud. I just don't want to keep anything to myself anymore."

"Everything said here will be kept in absolute secret. Your words to our Prophet are your own... You were quite the cat of her affection. And you had a profound impact on her goals. I believe she awaits your final words right now before she leaves her body and returns to silverpelt."

Kritz lowered his head and backed away. Blackleaf approached Rye's body, laying on its right side amidst stray snow. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the back of her shoulders. They were dark red, with parts of her back completely black and furless. Just a paw-step away, she leaned over to look at her face. They had left her eyes open, staring at an unoccupied wall on the other side of the den. None of the warrior-rah dared look into them. Her jaw was closed but twisted out of place; the lower half bent upward; Blackleaf shuttered. She quickly occupied herself with a much smaller scar on her chest. She parted Rye's fur to get a better look. It was healed over, but she knew it had gone deep. It was the size of one of the war dog's claws. Her eyes traveled down the she-kit's belly. Just below her chest held a deep, red bruise easily showing past her fur. Blackleaf forced herself to not think of Solestar. Rye's tail was laid in a perfect half-circle, pointing back to her head. She reached out a paw to rest on the body's shoulder, but quickly withdrew it. Her eyes jammed shut and her fur began to spike. The energy she had left in her drained away the closer she forced her paw. Then she opened her eyes; her paw lay on the kit's shoulder. The scent of blood flooded her nostrils; she shook her head to dispel the deception. She was shaking. Every little wince she made, she heard, made her ears and tail twitch. Blackleaf forced her gaze onto the wall in front of her. It was made of red-stone. And she was fixated on it. Her eyes inspected every crack, every tan line between the red bricks. Her head began to throb down the center of her skull; She ran her tail over it. The snow falling through the holes in the ceiling made no sound. The cats in the corners said nothing.

Even outside, there was nothing to hear. Her claws emerged and tangled with the kit's fur. She tried to keep herself composed. Her breathing was too fast. Her tail flicked too much. Each heartbeat she stared at the red-stone tempted her to charge. She could practically feel invisible flames licking the back of her neck, demanding a careless leap forward. The silence was broken. It came steadily, but reliably. The distant hiss of a sky-monster dashing through the night echoed throughout the den. It was enough to dilute the sound of her breathing. She retracted her claws and looked at the others; they were still in silent prayer with their heads down.

Blackleaf took a deep breath. "I was banished this morning. Probably not what you had in mind when Kritz said you wanted to see me safe. Or maybe it was. He did offer me a place in one of the nearby Star Covenant branches, but I can't... I just can't let myself start over. Not yet, at least. You idolized me. You were infatuated by me for reasons I'll never truly understand, now—I wish I did not throw away my last words to you. My Stars, I watched my littermate die this evening. I thought the same thing. I never spoke to him. I never comforted him, or understood him. But he laid down his life to defend Solestar, and me. I'm so proud of him and all he's achieved. I'm so sorry, Leaftail. I wish I could've been the littermate you deserved all throughout your life, and not just on your final day. Christa, I wish I could've been the kin to make you proud. Solestar, I wanted to be everything you envisioned in me. Wolfgang, I wish I could've been your mate and finally made you happy—I never learned how you felt about me after that night we spent together. Reiz, if you're real, I hope you reunite with Burn. And Rye..."

She paused, folding her ears towards the ceiling to hear the sky-monster make another pass overhead. It boomed just a bit quieter than before.

"Clementstar ordered me off this region before sunrise. When I said this region didn't need you, it really doesn't need me. You said it does. But look at all I've caused. If I was more like how you saw me, maybe I could've made you happy, too. But, somehow, I know you see things differently from me... You remind me of Littlestar. I saw

her in a dream I had. She told me I couldn't give up on myself. But it's hard not to after I've lost so much. I don't want to give up on myself. I don't want to fail everyone looking down on me in StarClan. Not again. That's why I can't go to your Covenant branch and just start over. But that's also why I can't forgive myself... I'm going to lose my medicine vest. It's to become a relic for the Star Covenant, just as Littlestar's collar became one from the Axin Mess. A reminder on who caused this Rye to succeed her mission. Even if I don't believe in your version of StarClan, I trust the wisdom your traditions represent. I'll be guarded by a warrior-rah, even. Part of it Clementstar's way of ensuring I don't come back. And the other part to record my recovery. A medium between the Star Covenant as a whole and the end of my history with you. I don't know what he expects of me, but I'll remember you're watching. I'll try not to give up again. I swear."

Blackleaf gently slid her paw onto the side of Rye's head.

"'No one needs some dirt-brained snake from the Place of No Stars who is *unberührt* in everything but daydreaming'. That was the last thing I said to you. You were clearly so much more than a star-stricken kit. I want to take those words back. I was just projecting myself onto you. You did nothing but love me, even if I didn't know you. You were everything good I saw in myself. Even after what I said... I want to curl up and rest for a while. Some time to think, you know? They say you won't leave until your business here is finished and your body is buried. So just speak to me for a while, okay? Tell me anything. Just don't let me be alone for these final moments of my time here. Please?"

The draft flowed through Rye's fur as Blackleaf laid down next to her, her back leaning into her belly. She was careful not to disturb the trauma scars and rested her head next to the she-kit's. Though her body had no heartbeat, she felt something in her chest. Her ears dropped. She wrapped her long tail around the she-kit's.

"Rye, I promise I'll live up to you."

The clouds grew a bit thicker. What little moonlight entered the den darkened until it became a dim ambience. It was just enough for Blackleaf to see Rye's odd eyes before closing her own. She no

longer wanted to see the blood dotting them both.

Allegiances (spoilers)

Clan of False Shadows †

Leader:
Solestar † - large older white she-cat with a light calico coat and green eyes. Has a distinctive bobtail and many scars under her fur.
fate: killed by Wolfgang (war dog)

Medicine Cats:
* **Blackleaf** - beautiful young albino she-cat with pink eyes and a long tail. Distinctively small and scentless. Blood relation to Littlestar. Often wears a twoleg-made dark green vest baring a medical cross given to her by Fleetheart to carry medicine. Experienced in both twoleg and natural medicine.
fate: banished

Flyfoot - massive older white wildcat with blue eyes. She is blind in her left eye and can't smell. She has no claws, a cropped tail and deformed nose from injuries, and many visible scars through thin patches of fur. Experienced in both natural and twoleg medicine. Former medicine cat of LeafClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg.

Fleetheart - older light gray mask-and-mantle she-cat with a large scar on her back, hidden by a dark brown twoleg-made vest. She has no claws, is missing a fang, and bares many visible scars through thin patches of fur. Experienced in twoleg medicine. Former medicine cat of StoneClan and AchseClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg.

Warriors:
Leaftail † - young tom with long tan fur and green eyes. Has a distinctive split tail from an injury. Senior warrior and littermate to Blackleaf.
fate: killed in battle by Heidi

Wolfgang † - old gray and black tabby tom with orange eyes and a bitter disposition. Senior warrior. He has no claws, a long scar on

his left leg, and weak lungs. Former kittypet and senior warrior of StoneClan and AchseClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg.
fate: killed by Solestar

Christa - older light brown she-cat with orange eyes. She has no claws and a large hairless scar on her left-front leg. Littermate to Littlestar and Blackleaf's mother. Former kittypet and warrior of AchseClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg.

Angelika - white she-cat with blue eyes and very long tail fur who was captured by UnderClan but released. Former kittypet.

Molenose - brown wildcat tom with large paws and a short tail who was captured by UnderClan. Has no claws and many battle scars. Former warrior of LeafClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg.

Apprentices:
unnamed apprentice - very young and ambitious brown she-cat. Large for her age. Scar on her muzzle from Blackleaf. Mentored by Wolfgang in a group.

UnderClan

Leader:
Clementstar - tan tom with a black muzzle and paws and orange eyes. Wears a distinctive twoleg trinket (silver crucifix necklace) around his ankle. Intelligent and often tired. Former kittypet from the twoleg city of Paris.

Deputies:
Blueclaw - old gray she-cat with a blue tint to her fur and hostile disposition. Has no claws, a limp, is partially deaf, and is frightened by sky-monsters. Former sub-leader (deputy) of BreezeClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg, and born in a distant land.

Burn - nearly bald tom with yellow eyes. What remains of his fur is gray. Has no claws, many scars, and dead skin patches. Former rogue leader from the twoleg city of Hamburg.

Heavyclaw- older large gray-brown tabby tom with a long tail and

shaggy fur. Missing an ear and half of the remaining one to injury, has large bald patches, and many battle scars. Former senior warrior of StoneClan and deputy of AchseClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg.

Medicine Cats:
Dovewhisker † - large thin gray she-cat who was captured by the Clan of False Shadows. Littermate to Owltounge. Sickly in appearance throughout from blackcough. Pretended to be a warrior and called herself 'The False Shadow'.
fate: executed by Solestar

Owltounge † - tom faithful to StarClan. Littermate to Dovewhisker.
fate: suicide

Warriors:
Windstripe † - gray tabby she-cat. Has ugly scars on her face. Highly respected senior warrior. Former rogue under Burn from the twoleg city of Hamburg.
fate: killed in battle

Felsblock - she cat. Mother to Gravelstep, Rabbitstep, and Dampenstep.

Gravelstep - young cat identical in appearance to Rabbitstep and Dampenstep. Held captive and released by the Clan of False Shadows. Mentored by Burn.

Rabbitstep - young cat identical in appearance to Gravelstep and Dampenstep. Held captive and released by the Clan of False Shadows. Mentored by Burn.

Dampenstep - young cat identical in appearance to Gravelstep and Rabbitstep. Held captive and released by the Clan of False Shadows. Mentored by Burn.

Star Covenant branch †

Leader:
* **Rye †** - young white she-kit with odd eyes (left blue, right green).

Revered as a prophet and reincarnation of the Star Covenant's ancient founder, Rye. Supposedly has the power of pestilence and caused the Clan of False Shadow's blackcough outbreak. Obsessed with Blackleaf.
fate: killed in battle by Solestar

Herald:
Kritz - old white and black tabby tom with long fur, a ringed tail, and a gray muzzle. Was the branch's leader before Rye's birth. Wise and zealous. Responsible for keeping the branch in contact with others and assisting Rye.

Warrior-rah:
Hover - tan she-cat with blue eyes. Has a large scar around her front paw that causes her to limp. Knowledgeable in combat and medicine, as all warrior-rah are

dog pack

Pack Leader:
Heidi - older muscular brown and black German Shepard female with brown eyes. Wears a distinctive leather dog vest bearing German insignias. Calm but violently triggered by memories of her military service and captivity by the Clan of False Shadows after the Great Sky War, bearing a massive scar from her muzzle to her tail as a result. Former attack dog to an *SS* unit with Karin and Juta.

Members:
Juta - older brown and black German Shepard female with brown eyes. Has a sharp wit and dominating personality. Former attack dog to an *SS* unit with Heidi and Karin.

Karin - older brown and black German Shepard female with brown eyes. Is triggered into panic by nightmares and memories of her military service. Former attack dog to an *SS* unit with Heidi and Juta.

Dona - older brown and black German Shepard female with brown eyes. Has a vulgar vocabulary and is extremely playful. Former

comfort dog aboard a German ship.

Wolfgang - older brown and black German Shepard male with brown eyes and shaggy fur. Does not speak and bares many scars, including a gunshot wound to his head. Former attack dog for the German army.

others

Reiz †: older gray and brown tortoiseshell she-cat. Littermate to Littlestar and Christa.

* **Littlestar** †: small gray and brown tortoiseshell she-cat. Distinctively small and scentless. Littermate to Christa. Former senior warrior of StoneClan and leader of AchseClan from the twoleg city of Hamburg. Resides in StarClan.

Author's Note (spoilers)

1/14/2020

Once again, this fanfic didn't stick close to the source material. Much more of it was brought in than its predecessor, *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*, but it deviated more, too. Ultimately, I am proud of how it came out. I think there are minimal spelling or grammar errors, just like the first (I used the proper 'rogue' this time, too), and it explained many aspects of the story to ensure non-*Warriors* fans could read it, too. Though I don't think any will. The deviations in this story from canon were fairly significant. I think they added more to the story without bogging things down in details. Not much worldbuilding was needed to explain these differences, though I wish I could have done more. But that would take the focus away from the characters, which was my primary goal compared to *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. Just like the first, I tried avoiding heavy exposition in these new deviations from canon. I wanted readers to understand it just by reading how characters behaved, or how some rules were adjusted, or reading into the history of said deviation from characters casually mentioning it in dialogue. That being said, this is what author notes are for.

- **The overall universe continues being in real life instead of the pseudo-fictional one canon *Warriors* is.**

The setting has changed slightly from *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. It is still in Germany, but it is no longer Nazi Germany. Taking place five years after World War II in 1950 and seven years after *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*, it is set in East Berlin. The setting was easy: East Berlin was somewhat desolate and abandoned in many places in the years following World War II. The Soviet Union controlled it and was still arguing about borders and such with the United States, Britain, and France. The specific region

Bleed takes place is called Ostkreuz. The region, at the time, was a completely abandoned railyard destroyed by Allied bombing during the war. The region would not be touched or inhabited again until the Soviets began expanding their rail networks across eastern Europe and needed Ostkreuz up and running.

As far as *Bleed* goes, this setting means no humans interfering, same as its predecessor. It is hinted the humans inhabiting Berlin are dangerous to cats by Heidi and Kritz. Extermination programs for feral cats and dogs are common in big cities, so I thought putting it in some alley or something would easily draw human ire. Especially if the clans are hundreds strong; both UnderClan and the Clan of False Shadows were larger than the clans in *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. I also did not want a story of human intervention or anything like that, considering the main forces in this were to be the main characters.

- **The subdivision of cat clans. Three are mentioned: ancestor clans, silverpelt clans, and Star Covenant branches.**

This was something I wanted to go into more detail on, but never got around to it. The charaters and their actions ended up dominating any talk on culture. I did, however, manage to throw quite a few details on the differences between all three types of clans. To start, silverpelt clans refer to canon clans. They follow the warrior code, are suspicious of outsiders, have a strict belief in StarClan, and only fight as a last resort. UnderClan was a silverpelt clan. Though the events of World War II (i.e., the Great Sky War) really shook up what it meant to be a silverpelt clan for them. Clementstar changed it even further by not allowing cats to show themselves unnecessarily and keeping secret the identities of all senior members. Ancestor clans have more deviations from canon. For starters, they have no deputies, multiple leaders, and allow outsiders. The Clan of False Shadows, perhaps, had the weakest worldbuilding of the three types in *Bleed*. Fleetheart gives a short history lesson of the clan, where a bulk of the lore is present. Even then, Fleetheart's view of the clan is biased because the other medicine cat, Flyfoot, was raised in a different clan entirely (LeafClan was a silverpelt clan, StoneClan was an amalgamation of clan rules due to being formed by kittypets). Blackleaf had her own

view of ancestor clans, of course, being born and raised in one unlike the other two. These views often clash in small ways, but never anything major. Though the war is more of a reason for the Clan of False Shadows and UnderClan to be fighting than anything, silverpelt and ancestor clans aren't supposed to like each other.

Then there's the Star Covenant. This is a very large deviation from canon. In my fanfics, powers aren't confirmed or denied due to it being in the real world. In the story, both clans state they don't believe in them. But this clan is supposed to have reincarnated 'superweapons' to convert, kill, or expand in the name of the Star Covenant. The Covenant itself isn't a clan, and is mentioned to be a single branch in a broader network of unified cat groups. They follow the same rules, same customs, same culture, and the same religion. The Star Covenant is mentioned to be the original teachings of StarClan and go back to ancient times. They are smaller, so their warriors also know first aid and are called different as well, caring for each other instead of relying on one cat. I wanted different branches and clashes to show between them, but the characters took most of the story. Also, I did not want to bog a sequel down with extra worldbuilding that might or might not be relevant later on. It is a *Warriors* fanfic after all. And *Warriors* is a relatively simple series.

My reason for doing this, however, is it seems realistic in the context of *Warriors*. Unlike humans, cat clans couldn't possibly establish reliable long-term communication, culture, exchange, or recording of any kind. They're cats (and, in my opinion, it defeats the purpose of an animal story starring an animal cast if they can do everything humans can [unless they're mythical/fictional, like dragons or something]). At some point, there is no way a clan in southern England would act exactly the same as a clan in Scotland. I want to explore this in future *Warriors* fanfic, but the third book is destined for a much different setting.

- **The passage of time is, more or less, consistent.**

The passage of time was a big change made against canon, as well. Most *Warriors* fanfics take place from-kit-to-x. There's nothing wrong with this, but I wanted to do something different. Just like *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*, we start with characters already

assuming their positions of power or influence over the plot. Blackleaf starts as a newly-appointed medicine cat, Rye is already born and raised as a religious figure, and Heidi has already fought her war and is living with her demons. No kit raisings, no dead parents, no promotion ceremonies (well technically there's one). Also, time does not skip large swaths like it does in canon and most fanfics. The time of day or night is described, as is a day or so worth of passing. I received some notes it was hard to follow, since it's just one or two sentences a chapter describing the change, but I would not pass it any other way. I did not want to be explicit about it. No "it has been two days since..." unless a character said it in a conversation. Good or bad, that's up to the readers.

Now, to post some small facts that aren't explicitly mentioned in *Bleed* :

- If *Bleed* had an opening and closing song, it would open with *Living Today – Ravenscry* and end with *The Ravens – Tristania*.

- *Bleed* is around 147,900 words, making it about 10,000 words longer than *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. It was originally over 165,000 words before the middle and end were rewritten.

- *Bleed* was started March 2017, first draft finished in May 2019, first posted December 2019, and finished all editing plus posting the final chapter January 2020. The dates are far apart due to going through my last year of college when I started. Most of *Bleed's* first draft was written in my college library.

- Just like *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*, *Bleed's* original first draft and outline are kept unaltered in an offline archive. The first draft for the former ended up much closer to the final book than *Bleed's*. Maybe someday, they'll be released as an example for a first draft.

- The editing on *Bleed*, despite taking longer, was far more streamlined than *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. The process goes first draft, comment sections plus rewrite for second draft, and a pass with Word's text-to-speech for the final draft.

- *Bleed* was posted one chapter a week during 2020, missing two

weeks and the whole month of that December. I was tired of holding onto it, so I posted the prologue early. This caused the updates to be much slower than *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. I do not want to do that again.

- It was intentional for both *Bleed* and *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning* to have little to no subversions, twists, surprises, or setting changes, unlike canon *Warriors* and other fanfics. I wanted the actions taken by the main characters to be influenced by nothing but their morals and ideals, other characters' physical and emotional states, and their current situations. In short, I wanted their actions to be raw and more realistic.

- Blackleaf's scentless pelt was brought about by the same birth defect Littlestar had. She is even short like her kin was. Blackleaf views it in several different ways throughout the story, but as a medicine cat does not use it for combat-related reasons like Littlestar.

- Blackleaf's albinism was a deliberate literary decision. Being the purest form of white a cat can be, things like dirt and blood would show easy. In addition to not grooming herself to remain scentless and not allowing others to do so, blemishes linger for quite some time. Lacking pigments also symbolizes her birth as a truly blank slate; she chose what she wanted to do despite her grooming or even her own dreams.

- Rye was originally meant to hate Blackleaf instead of obsessing over her. She was meant to symbolize rogue hatred and its harmful effects on everything. Including the narrative, which is why it never made it past the outline. In the end, she was made into a self-aware foil for Blackleaf.

- The idea of Rye being openly physically attracted to Blackleaf was teased while creating her character, but cut during the outline to avoid conflicts with her intended role.

- Blackleaf and Rye were originally intended to meet several times throughout the story, even fight one another and be captured together by UnderClan. This still happened, technically, but the pair only truly met once and never fought.

- Blackleaf's romantic attraction towards Wolfgang was meant to be her way of admitting she had a problem with her actions without actually admitting it to herself. Whether he returned her feelings that night is between them...

- The Star Covenant was the first clan I ever thought of for this *Dying Stars* trilogy, even before StoneClan and LeafClan. I've sat on this name since 2014, when *A Reign of Thunder and Lighting's* first draft was started.

- Solestar was originally supposed to be far more manipulative, but she was toned down into more of a failed mentor and "best case scenario" for Great Sky War survivors.

- Clementstar was originally to have one-sided romantic feelings for Solestar, but this was scrapped due to not making sense in the context of their war.

- Heidi's role in the story was originally less isolated, as she actively wanted revenge on Solestar for her captivity. She was changed to avoid clashing with the PTSD she and the rest of her pack has from the Great Sky War.

- Heidi's meltdown was originally directed at Rye, injuring her. It seemed more realistic she would realize a problem with herself if she gravely injured a friend.

- It is never stated if Reiz is alive or dead...

- Solestar was originally killed by Juta. This was changed to Wolfgang for matching the name of the tom she killed in part three, and for Juta being rewritten to injured in part two.

- The Star Covenant uses a class of warriors called warrior-rah, related to the Covenant's roots in ancient Egypt. As of this chapter, the origin story of the Covenant has yet to be revealed.

- A fourth medicine cat was written out of *Bleed*. Named Threepaw, he was an old foreign-born tom with three paws. He was to be Blackleaf's mentor, but was cut during second draft rewrites for doing nothing Fleetheart or Flyfoot couldn't have done.

- The most common cause of death was battle wounds. But most of the battles were mentioned in the background only, since the story focused on a medicine cat and one who wouldn't be fighting.

- Despite the name, *Bleed* was far less violent than *A Reign of Thunder and Lightning*. The few violent scenes written, though, are meant to be more mature.

- *Bleed's* entire midsection was rewritten, with the largest rewrites being Rye's second appearance with the dog pack. Over 50,000 words were changed and added to the middle. The end was partially rewritten to match changes to the middle.

- StarClan was originally set to make no appearance, like in *A Regin of Thunder and Lightning*. This was changed in the final draft due to deciding the setting of the third book, and to bring back Littlestar in a meaningful way.

- The Star Covenant was originally to have an emphasis on analyzing StarClan's actions through history, comparing their own to the Axin Mess. This led to four additional names on top of those mentioned who make no physical appearance (like Littlestar and Panzer). This was scrapped in the outline to keep the focus on Blackleaf and Rye.

- Despite Blackleaf making contact with StarClan, she never learned why they went silent and plunged clan religion into chaos...

Overall, I hope you enjoyed *Warriors: Bleed*. I enjoyed writing it. I'd love to hear anything you had to say, good or bad, or any questions you might have.